





VIOLET MORTIMER.

VOL. I.

VIOLET MORTIMER.

A Novel. 10d{.

BY

FRANCES NOBLE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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VIOLET MORTIMER.

CHAPTER I.

VIOLET MORTIMER stood at the window, looking out across the small, prim garden into the quiet street beyond, with a gaze that showed that her thoughts were far away. A glance showed you that she was very young, little more than fifteen ; but her *petite* figure, though slight and childish, was yet easy and graceful. Her features were irregular, and her face dark skinned for an English girl, with no rosy healthy colour in the cheeks, so that, at a passing glance, she might certainly have been called plain ; but if you went closer and looked into her large brown eyes, which were very soft and tender in repose, you would see that they were a beauty in themselves, rendering the perhaps plain face charming, as they gazed at you. The young girl was quietly, almost negligently attired, and the thick

Geo. Reg. May 30, 1854 Chiswick = 31

masses of her brown hair were somewhat untidily disposed of, being arranged in no particular fashion above her low, broad forehead, her whole appearance showing that she had not devoted much time or attention to her toilet.

As she stood thus, listlessly, her ears were arrested by the sound of carriage wheels, and presently a small pony phaeton drew up at the garden gate.

The phaeton was occupied by two ladies, both richly dressed, who at once alighted and entered the house, and came into the room where Violet stood. Their likeness to each other made it easy to perceive that the newcomers were mother and daughter. The elder lady looked about five-and-forty; she bore traces of having been handsome in her youth, and would have been very good-looking still, but that her countenance was marred by a disagreeable, haughty expression. The young lady, her daughter, was between seventeen and eighteen, and was strikingly handsome, more so than her mother ever could have been. She was tall and majestic in figure, and the outline of her face was so perfect as to be almost statuesque. But, handsome as her

countenance certainly was, it was not a lovable one. The light blue eyes were still and void of expression, and the haughty, resolute coldness of her face made her appear much older than she was in reality. Her gracefully shaped head was furnished with an abundance of pale golden hair, tastefully disposed so as to suit the elegant bonnet, which, together with the rest of her dress, was in the height of the fashion.

On entering the room, the young lady approached Violet, and with an impatient gesture, exclaimed,—

“ Half-past five, and you not gone up yet, and you know mamma expected you to be dressed by six, as we cannot be ready ! Perhaps you intend to disgrace us by appearing in your present costume ! ” and she looked disdainfully on the faded dress and carelessly arranged hair of the younger girl.

They formed a striking contrast, those two girls, the one fair and cold, the look of annoyance spoiling just then the beauty of her perfect countenance, and the other with her dark face and irregular features, and her whole soul looking forth from her soft expressive eyes, which flashed proudly now. For an

instant she seemed about to answer angrily, then she checked herself, and merely said quietly, though somewhat proudly, as she left the room,—

“I shall be ready; you need not be afraid.”

The elder lady said nothing, but contented herself with darting a look of displeasure after Violet’s retreating figure.

Violet Mortimer was an orphan. Her mother had died when she was an infant, and her father when she was about ten years old.

Mr. Mortimer had made a large fortune as a merchant, and had retired from business several years before his death. Violet was his only child, and upon her mother’s death he devoted himself entirely to the little girl, who was passionately attached to him. About a year before his death Mr. Mortimer had married again. His second wife was a Mrs. Gordon, a widow of middle age and very small fortune, who had one daughter, who was two or three years older than Violet. Mr. Mortimer had married Mrs. Gordon in the hope of finding in her a mother for his little Violet, and a protector for her in case of his death, having no near relatives of his own. He lived just long enough to see how he had been mis-

taken. Before their marriage, the handsome widow had shown only the amiable side of her character to Mr. Mortimer ; but when once she was his wife, he began to see her as she was in reality, wholly given up to selfishness and vanity, and so entirely engrossed by her affection for her own daughter as to render her wholly indifferent to his little Violet, who was a child of deep feeling and loving nature, and who, rather than grieve her father by complaining, often bore, unknown to him, slights and positive unkindness from Mrs. Mortimer and her daughter. Eleanor Gordon and Violet shared the same governesses and instructors, and from the first, Eleanor took a jealous dislike to Violet, partly in imitation of her mother, and partly because there was little sympathy between her own nature and the fine, enthusiastic disposition of her young companion. Eleanor Gordon was a true child of her mother, and promised even thus early to rival her in cold selfishness and vanity as well as in beauty. She did not hesitate to express her contempt for Violet, whom she was pleased to call “ plain and sallow.” Any slights offered to herself Violet bore with all the childish firmness of which she was capable ; but any allusion of

Eleanor's which savoured of disrespect to her father always caused her to reply with passionate anger and many tears. The child would often think with a yearning, painful for one so young, of the happy days when she and her papa had been alone together, before Mrs. Mortimer and Eleanor had come to disturb their happiness. Mr. Mortimer was an invalid for two or three months before his death, and during this time Violet was almost constantly at his bedside. When she fully comprehended that her dear papa was really going to die, and that she would be left alone, the little girl's passionate burst of sorrow was heart-rending for her father to witness. She would not be comforted, and it was only as the end drew near, and she was told that her grief disturbed her father, that the child struggled to subdue her weeping rather than be taken from him. Mr. Mortimer died, with his hand clasped in his little Violet's, and earnestly begging of his wife to love and be a mother to the child. Mrs. Mortimer, softened and awe-stricken for the time, promised all he asked, and he breathed his last, consoled by the hope that she would keep her promise, and that, with time, Violet might grow to love

her and be happy. But at the same time, Mr. Mortimer, knowing now his wife's character, and fearing that, contrary to his hopes, she might after all fail in the promises given in those last solemn hours, did not leave her sole guardian to his darling Violet. As we have said before, he had no near living relatives, and his oldest friend was his godmother, a Mrs. Ashleigh. At the time of Mr. Mortimer's death she was about sixty years of age, but strong, active, and healthy as in earlier life. Her husband, who had been dead about ten years, was a gentleman of private property and considerable wealth. Their residence, which was beautifully situated in one of the northern counties, had belonged to his family for several generations. Mr. and Mrs. Ashleigh were married twenty years without having any children, and then a son had been born to them, who had now inherited his father's wealth and position. When a boy, Mr. Mortimer had been strongly attached to his godmother, and had received much kindness from her, and when he was grown up and had settled in business, their intercourse still continued. When he married, it necessarily became less frequent, but letters were still

exchanged between them, though Mrs. Ashleigh never saw her godson again.

During his last illness Mr. Mortimer wrote to her, telling her he was lying on what would most likely be his death-bed, and asking her, for the sake of their old friendship, to consent to be joint guardian with his wife of his little Violet. He said nothing to her of his disappointment in his second marriage, and concluded by saying how happy it would make him to know that perhaps at some future day his little girl might become acquainted with one from whom her father had received so much kindness. Full of sorrow for the comparatively early death (for he was but forty years of age) of one in whom she had been so interested, Mrs. Ashleigh willingly consented to undertake the joint guardianship of little Violet, knowing nothing of the deep anxiety which had prompted Mr. Mortimer in his request, and ignorant that there was any cause why her guardianship should not be little more than nominal. So Mrs. Mortimer and Mrs. Ashleigh were Violet's guardians, and Mr. Mortimer passed away from this world, leaving his ample fortune to his little girl, and his wife comfortably provided for.

Soon after his death Mrs. Mortimer, who did not love the country, gave up the house in which they had hitherto resided, which was surrounded by charming scenery, about thirty miles from London, and took a house in the metropolis itself, in a good street, where she was within reach of all its pleasures and gaieties. Violet cried as if her heart would break when they left the place where she and her dear papa had been so happy together, and as she said good-bye to her own little garden, in which it had been her delight to sow the flower seeds so as to form the words, "Papa and Violet," and to see her father's pleased smile as she did so. Her pony, too, on which she had been used to ride so fearlessly, had to be parted with, for Mrs. Mortimer told her that in town she would have no time for such amusement until she should be grown up. Ten years old, she was told, was quite old enough to begin to apply herself in earnest to her studies, and to learn the manners of a young lady. Poor little Violet ! her fond heart had no one to love or to lean upon, for, alas ! her stepmother very soon forgot the promise she had made to her dying husband, and the sorrow that in a happier child would,

after the fashion of children, have been laid aside and forgotten, was cherished and retained in the lonely little heart as though it feared to lose the image and remembrance of the one loved one as it had so sadly lost the reality. Mrs. Mortimer was indignant and annoyed that her husband had not chosen to leave Violet in her sole charge, for though she did not love the child, she liked to have undisputed power over her, and it was not pleasant to have to report her health and progress to Mrs. Ashleigh and to be obliged to see that Violet wrote occasionally to her. Beyond this the old lady never thought of interfering. She knew nothing of the real aspect of affairs ; Violet's short notes, written under the superintendence of her stepmother, told nothing, and Mrs. Ashleigh did not think the child could have a more suitable protector than her father's wife. It might have been better if Mr. Mortimer had not so delicately refrained from letting her know a little of his wife's character ; but as it was, the old lady thought it was more as a last act of friendship he had made his request to her than for any other reason.

And so the years passed on. Violet never grew to love the elegant London house, with

its brick and stone surroundings, and its small apology for a garden. Nor did she grow to love her stepmother and Eleanor Gordon. Any efforts to do so or to gain their affection, which were prompted at first by her generous nature, were repelled by coldness and often by unkindness, and Violet lived a strange, lonely life as regarded those around her. She formed a world of her own, as it were, peopled with those of whom she read in history or romance, and amongst whom she had her favourites, loved with a fondness second only to that with which she cherished her dead father's memory. It was but a sad, dreamy existence for a child, and it would have been better if Violet had been sent to school and there made friends and companions, for, as it was, she was entirely friendless, Mrs. Mortimer always forbidding any intimacy with the governesses she engaged. Any attempt at such on their part would have procured their instant dismissal, and Eleanor, in whom her mother's nature was intensified, would have only been too ready to report it if anything of the kind took place. As time wore on, Eleanor's dislike to Violet amounted almost to a jealous hatred, since she knew that while

she herself would have but a small fortune, Violet was possessed of considerable wealth, for Mrs. Mortimer did not scruple openly to lament this in her daughter's presence. Eleanor's only consolation was the reflection that while it would take all Violet's fortune to cover her plainness and dowdiness, she herself, the beautiful and one day to be the admired Eleanor, had only to speak the word to bring a host of wealthy suitors to her feet. And while such unholy thoughts filled the worldly, selfish heart of the young girl, she would have laughed to scorn the idea that her less beautiful companion would have joyfully given the whole of her fortune if it could have bought for her the sweets of a mother's or a sister's love. The happiest days in Violet's life now were those which they spent each summer at the seaside. There, no longer hemmed in by the London streets and proprieties, she could wander alone and undisturbed by the shore, listening with rapture to the voice of the restless sea, which seemed to speak to the lonely, imaginative child in a manner that happier children would not have understood. There sometimes she would make friends with little children on the beach,

and enjoy playing with them or helping them to gather shells. Mrs. Mortimer seldom interfered with Violet's lonely rambles, for she and Eleanor were glad to be relieved of her when in the society of any friends they made or met, and Mrs. Mortimer had always, since her husband's death, kept Violet as much as possible out of sight of the acquaintances she entertained at her house, while Eleanor had almost always been present on such occasions. Mrs. Mortimer would allege as an excuse for Violet's non-appearance that she was shy and so forth; and no wonder, seeing the life she led, that she was shy and almost proudly reserved for a child, and that whenever she *was* present at her stepmother's entertainments few cared to speak to the quiet, plainly-dressed girl who formed such a contrast to the beautiful, stately Eleanor Gordon.

The time came when Eleanor was seventeen, and she was emancipated from the schoolroom, to her own and her mother's satisfaction. Mrs. Mortimer could now have her handsome daughter entirely with her and introduce her fully into society, which had been so long the aim she had looked forward

to. It is to be feared that Eleanor's gratification arose more from the thought that she could now enter into all the world's gaieties and amusements, and receive the admiration she doubted not would be lavished upon her, rather than from any pleasure she felt at the idea of being her mother's constant companion. She was scarcely worthy of that mother's intense affection for her, for in comparison it was but little she gave in return. Much of Mrs. Mortimer's neglect of and injustice to Violet was due to her engrossing love for her own daughter, for her heart was not generous enough to warm towards one whom she jealously imagined might perhaps one day, with her large fortune though plainer figure, be preferred before Eleanor. It is possible that if she had not had her daughter, with her stronger will and even more selfish nature than her own, to engage all the affection she had to bestow, Mrs. Mortimer might in time have learnt to love the lonely orphan left to her care.

Mrs. Mortimer had another reason for rejoicing that her own girl was now of an age to take her place in society, which was that both she and Eleanor could not fail to

perceive that Violet, now fifteen, was rapidly losing the appearance of a child and that her figure, though not tall, was slight and very graceful. She would not be handsome, but they could not be unconscious of the fact that no one could gaze long on her speaking countenance and call her plain. This conviction, which filled them with secret chagrin, had been increased by a circumstance which had occurred a short time before the day on which our tale opens. A lady, who was present at a small entertainment given by Mrs. Mortimer, had noticed Violet and drawn her into conversation, and had felt deeply interested in her. Being keen and shrewd, she had divined from Mrs. Mortimer's manner how matters stood, and she had taken an aversion to the cold, stately Eleanor.

The following evening she met Mrs. Mortimer and her daughter again at a ball given by a mutual acquaintance, and taking a seat by the former, she said to her in Eleanor's hearing,—

“ What a very interesting girl your step-daughter is, Mrs. Mortimer! One can see, of course, that she is yet very young, but I assure you she made quite a conquest of me

last night, if it were only by her very beautiful eyes. I really do so much prefer her style of face to those cold, stately beauties who look as if they had no souls or are afraid to let them look out through their statuesque countenances." Then, as though unconscious she had done otherwise than please Mrs. Mortimer, she talked on smilingly on other subjects.

This incident was not likely to lessen Mrs. Mortimer's dislike and Eleanor Gordon's jealous hatred of Violet.

All these years Violet had been accustomed to write regularly to Mrs. Ashleigh, and received from her in return kind little notes, and occasionally a present for herself, and latterly the old lady had expressed a hope that it might not be long before she and Violet became personally acquainted. But as yet she said nothing of visiting them, nor had there been any invitation for Violet to go and stay with her. Mrs. Mortimer had never felt inclined to cultivate Mrs. Ashleigh's acquaintance by asking her to visit them, though of late she had begun to think it would have been pleasanter for herself and Eleanor if Violet had been left entirely in

Mrs. Ashleigh's care, since she herself had not absolute control over her.

A few days before the one on which our tale opens Mrs. Mortimer had received a note from Mrs. Ashleigh, saying that she would very shortly have to pass through London on her way to Brighton to visit some old friends there, and as she very seldom left home, she did not wish to miss this opportunity, if agreeable to Mrs. Mortimer, of calling upon her and making Violet's acquaintance. She added that her son could not accompany her, having just started upon a continental tour on which he would be absent some two or three months. This unexpected letter caused some little indecision to Mrs. Mortimer as to whether it would not be wise to invite Mrs. Ashleigh to stay a few days with them when she passed through London. It might be well, after all, she said to herself, to cultivate her acquaintance, for she was wealthy, and certainly above themselves in the social scale. Mrs. Mortimer had never felt very amicably disposed towards this valued friend of her husband's, but now that circumstances would have it so, she felt obliged to offer civility to her. If she felt any uneasiness on the score

of her injustice to Violet, she banished the unpleasant reflection by telling herself she had done all that could be expected of her, and that it was not likely she could love her stepdaughter as her own child. Accordingly she wrote an invitation to Mrs. Ashleigh, secretly regretting perhaps as she did so that young Mr. Ashleigh could not accompany his mother. Her invitation was accepted by Mrs. Ashleigh, who wrote to her Brighton friends, postponing her arrival amongst them until after she should have paid a few days' visit to Mrs. Mortimer.

Violet looked forward to the arrival of her father's friend with a feeling of joyous expectation wholly new to her lonely heart. During the past years since her father's death she had often thought of Mrs. Ashleigh, and had longed with all her childish desire to know and love her. Now that the time was come that she was to see her, all her dead father had told her of this dear friend of his youth came to her mind again—of her constant kindness, even his description of her beautiful home in the north, where he had spent so many happy days with her and her husband while he was yet a boy, long

before they had a son of their own. And then Violet wondered what this son was like, young Mr. Ashleigh, whose birth had caused such joy to his parents. But of him she only thought little; it was in his mother she felt interested, her father's dear friend. Would Mrs. Ashleigh love her, if only for her father's sake—would she care for her affection? Perhaps not, for she had been all these years without trying to see and know her. In her short life Violet had had sad experience of disappointment where she had expected love. She clearly remembered the day when she was a little child, how her father first told her he was going to bring her home a new mamma and a sister too. And how, when she had not at first liked the idea altogether, he had dwelt on the love and new happiness they would bring to her, and then afterwards how she had not been able to understand why it proved so different. And the young girl, almost a child yet, prayed that she might not be disappointed again, but that she might love her father's friend as he himself had done.

Mrs. Ashleigh was expected on the evening of the day on which our tale opens, and

Mrs. Mortimer had previously invited several friends to her house for the same evening. She and Eleanor, on making their appearance as before described, had been attending a flower show, and, not having known beforehand whether they would return sufficiently early to make their elaborate evening toilets, so as to be ready to receive Mrs Ashleigh, had desired Violet to be dressed in time to do so, and make Mrs. Mortimer's apologies to her. Violet, all absorbed in her own thoughts, had nearly forgotten the time, and thus caused Eleanor's angry exclamation on entering the room.

CHAPTER II.

USUALLY, Violet was careless of her dress, and thought little of her own appearance. Mrs. Mortimer had ever shown little concern as to whether her stepdaughter looked well or otherwise, merely taking care that she was sufficiently well dressed not to disgrace her when she allowed her to appear in company. And Violet had been so long accustomed to hearing the fact that she was plainlooking, from Eleanor and Mrs. Mortimer, that until now it had troubled her very little. It had mattered not that she was not pretty ; who was there to care whether she were so or not ? If her papa had lived, it might have mattered, for it might have pleased him, perhaps, if his daughter had been beautiful. Violet was, unconsciously perhaps, a great admirer of the beautiful, and the heroes and heroines of her imagination, or of whom she read, never failed to be invested with its

charm ; but of herself she had yet had little cause to think. It was now for the first time when she looked forward to the coming of one who might love her and whom she might please, that she became conscious of a wish that she were beautiful like Eleanor. She took great pains with her simple toilet on this evening, and when, arrayed in her plain white evening dress, she took a last look in her glass, she felt a childish pleasure at her own appearance, for something told her she was not so devoid of beauty as Eleanor would have her believe.

Mrs. Ashleigh arrived, and with beating heart Violet went down to receive her. Without intending it, Mrs Mortimer had afforded pleasure to both of them, for both were glad that their first meeting should be private. As Violet entered the room and approached Mrs. Ashleigh, the latter, without giving her time to make her stepmother's apologies, rose with the simple exclamation, "Violet !" and drew her close to her as she kissed her warmly. Then taking both the young girl's hands within her own, Mrs. Ashleigh looked at her earnestly with tears in her eyes.

" My love," she said, " how this moment recalls to my mind the days of your dear papa's boyhood, when he was but the age you are now! You must love me for his sake, Violet, will you not? "

The look in Violet's soft brown eyes as she raised them to Mrs Ashleigh's face was a sufficient answer. The new feeling of happiness because she was loved was very sweet to the lonely child as she sat there by the side of her so long unknown friend. At her first glance at Mrs. Ashleigh's countenance Violet had felt, with the heart's true instinct, that she should love her, and, reserved and shy as her peculiar life had rendered her, her naturally frank, enthusiastic nature could not resist this new joy, but expanded at once, as it were, under its influence. Mrs. Ashleigh was one of those in whom advancing age is rendered beautiful, in whom it is invested with a charm which forbids regret for the vanished bloom of youth. In earlier life her face might not have been handsome, but attractive it must have always been, for it wore a striking expression of intellect and sweetness combined, which could not fail to fascinate the beholder. Now, at sixty-five, Mrs. Ash-

leigh was as erect and graceful as she had ever been, and as Violet gazed in admiration at her venerable countenance, shaded by the silky hair fast becoming white, the recollection of her father's description of this dear friend of his youth came vividly to her mind, and she understood how charming Mrs. Ashleigh must have been in past days, since so much beauty remained to her still.

To Violet's apologies for Mrs. Mortimer's non-appearance, she answered,—

“Violet, my love, she will not blame me for being glad it has happened so. It pleases me to have our first meeting in private, for though I must not consider Mrs. Mortimer or Miss Gordon as entire strangers, still, you are like my own especial property, you know, and during these few days we must learn to know and love each other, and then in future you can write to me more freely than you have done. Do you think Mrs. Mortimer would let you come and stay a little while with me when I return home, my love? You do not look strong, and our fine country air would be refreshing to you after this crowded London. Norman (that is my son's name) will be absent some time, and if you will

come and cheer my loneliness and not find it dull, it will please me so much."

"Dull!" exclaimed Violet; then she added very earnestly, "I should like it so very, very much."

Mrs. Ashleigh looked with a kind, pleased smile into the speaking eyes raised to hers, and said,—

"Then it is a compact, only waiting for Mrs. Mortimer's consent to ratify it."

Then speaking seriously and earnestly, she told Violet how ever since Mr. Mortimer had died and left his child partly to her care, she had wished to see and know her personally; but that she had resolved not to attempt to do so until such time as Mrs. Mortimer would know she was not actuated by any wish to interfere with her own management. She felt that a stepmother had a prior claim to the love of her husband's child, and she had not wished Violet to be in any danger of becoming the least estranged from Mrs. Mortimer through her interference. Mrs. Ashleigh had never doubted for a moment that Violet was loved and duly cared for by her stepmother, and she had imagined that she had found a sister in Eleanor Gordon. So

she had restrained her own desire to have Violet occasionally with her, merely doing what was absolutely necessary as her guardian, until the present time, when Violet was growing up, having been so many years under her stepmother's guidance that Mrs. Ashleigh felt there was no danger of her own motives in wishing to have her with her for a while being misconstrued. All this she explained to Violet, saying in conclusion,—

“ But we know each other at last, my love, and you must be doubly precious to me because I have waited for you so long.”

Ever since Mrs. Ashleigh's warm greeting at her entrance, Violet had been struggling with the tears of joyous emotion, which she could scarcely keep back at the new, deep happiness and feeling of security that she was loved and might love in return, and now they burst forth freely as she exclaimed, almost involuntarily,—

“ Oh, Mrs. Ashleigh, I have longed so for you ever since dear, darling papa died and left me alone ! ”

Anything further was checked by the entrance of Mrs. Mortimer and Eleanor, both dressed in elegant evening costume. The

former graciously approached and welcomed Mrs. Ashleigh, and introduced her daughter. After the customary civilities, Mrs. Mortimer turned to Violet with a feeling of surprise and annoyance at the evident traces of tears on her face.

"Violet, why have you not asked Mrs. Ashleigh if she would wish to be shown to her room before this time?" then turning to Mrs. Ashleigh, she added, "You must allow me to apologise for Violet's thoughtlessness. You must be very much fatigued after your long journey."

"Not at all, thank you, Mrs. Mortimer," was the reply, and smiling very kindly on Violet, Mrs. Ashleigh added, "Violet and I have been so very happy making each other's acquaintance that we both forgot everything else, and to me the rest before dressing was pleasant, though I expected to feel much more fatigued after my journey than I do, as of late I have travelled so little."

While Mrs. Ashleigh was speaking, Eleanor had been making her own reflections.

"So Mrs. Ashleigh and Violet are fast friends already. If it is to be so, it would be as well if we were relieved of Violet altogether

by her. She would be safely out of my way, but—suppose—young Mr. Ashleigh—but no, she is too young, and far too simple for that, at least yet. There has been a scene, evidently; Violet's face shows that; what about, I wonder!"

After a little more conversation Mrs. Mortimer conducted her guest to her room and left her to dress. Mrs. Ashleigh somewhat regretted that they were expecting company that evening, as it promised her less chance of becoming more acquainted with Mrs. Mortimer and her daughter, concerning whom she could not divest herself of an indefinable feeling of distrust. She had only seen them together with Violet for a few minutes, and yet she had been unfavourably impressed, and no longer felt completely satisfied as to Violet's happiness. She felt that, from what she already knew of the young girl herself, she would be too proud and generous to complain willingly, and Mrs. Ashleigh knew that the burst of tears and the exclamation which had been interrupted by Mrs. Mortimer's entrance could not have come from one so young if she were living happily in the love of those who filled the place of a mother and

sister to her. She determined, therefore, to watch closely during her stay, and if her fears proved correct she would not hesitate to take Violet from her stepmother's care.

All during that evening Violet sat by Mrs. Ashleigh's side, her brown eyes sparkling with her newly found happiness. Mrs. Ashleigh was further enlightened as to how matters stood on seeing that scarcely any of the company seemed to know Violet intimately, as they did Eleanor, and on questioning her she found that the young girl came but seldom among her stepmother's visitors. Mrs. Mortimer and her daughter felt it useless to attempt to conceal their indifference to Violet, as from the first they had seen that her part would be taken by Mrs. Ashleigh, with whom they were not slow to perceive they could never be kindred spirits. Mrs. Mortimer had expected that Mrs. Ashleigh would be struck, as so many others were, by Eleanor's beauty, and visions of a possible invitation for her to Ashleigh Court, and consequently an acquaintance with its master, Norman Ashleigh, had been in her mind when she invited his mother on her present visit. But though chagrined at the absorbing attention Mrs. Ashleigh

bestowed on Violet, and the small notice she took of Eleanor, Mrs. Mortimer would not give up hope, and still maintained the semblance of polite attention to her guest.

On retiring for the night, Mrs. Ashleigh pondered with indignation on all she had learnt since her arrival, and grieved to think how she had been mistaken in her confidence as to the happiness of her young charge. She had been unfavourably impressed from the outset by Mrs. Mortimer, and knew it would be impossible ever to grow to like her, but it was Eleanor who repelled her most strongly. She could scarcely account for it, but so it was.

“With her perfect face and figure there is something in her eyes I cannot like,” was the thought that would force itself into Mrs. Ashleigh’s mind. “It is strange how strongly she repels me. I hope I do her an injustice,” she said to herself; “but it seems to me that girl would be a dangerous one to have for one’s enemy.”

The next morning a party of ladies called, amongst whom was the one before mentioned who had taken notice of Violet and praised her so much to Eleanor’s disadvantage. On being introduced to Mrs. Ashleigh, knowing

the relation in which she stood to Violet, she entered into earnest conversation with her, leaving her companions to Mrs. Mortimer. She confided to Mrs. Ashleigh all she knew of Violet's lonely, unloved life, and ended by saying how much she herself loved and admired her. Mrs. Ashleigh was not one who loved tale-bearing or idle gossips, but as she perceived that her informant was in earnest and considered it her duty to tell her all she knew respecting Violet, she listened silently, and then thanked her for the interest she took in the young girl, merely adding that she would try to find out where the fault lay and see how matters could be remedied. She would not say more to one whom she had known but a few minutes, but in her own mind her resolution to take Violet entirely under her protection was confirmed. She felt that her motives for refraining so long from interfering with her were not likely to have been appreciated by Mrs. Mortimer.

"Poor Charles!" she thought, "he must have feared this. If he could have brought himself to tell me of his disappointment and his anxiety, poor little Violet should not have been left so long uncared for."

It was on the third day of her visit that Mrs. Ashleigh took the opportunity of being alone with Mrs. Mortimer to speak of Violet to her. As gently as she could, and so as to annoy her as little as possible, she told her of her wish to take Violet away, and give her a home at Ashleigh Court.

"I think," she went on, "that I could make her happier than I have found she is here. Her father was very dear to me, Mrs. Mortimer, and it is very painful to me to know the unloved life she has been leading since his death, for neither you nor your daughter have tried to conceal your entire indifference to her. All these years I have refrained from even seeing Violet, knowing that your claim was greater than mine, and never doubting that she had found a mother in you. I have been mistaken, and now I do not think you can refuse to give her up to me. I do not like to have to say all this, nor is it my place to attach blame to you, especially now when I am a guest in your house, but I thought it best to have one explanation, and then, your consent gained, to mention the past no more, but let it be forgotten between us."

Mrs. Mortimer, as she listened to Mrs.

Ashleigh, felt it was useless to show offence, for she could not deny the truth of what she said. She decided it was best to smother her indignation, and give in with a good grace, and by so doing perhaps ingratiate herself with Mrs. Ashleigh, and gain the end she had looked forward to when she had invited her. And, putting that aside, would it not be well if Violet, now fast growing up and known to be heiress to a considerable fortune, were safely out of Eleanor's way here in London, where her wealth might prove a more attractive prize than Eleanor's beauty and small fortune? So, blandly and calmly Mrs. Mortimer answered that she could not withhold her consent to Mrs. Ashleigh's offer, so advantageous to Violet, adding that it was impossible for anyone to expect she could bestow the same care and love on a stepdaughter as were demanded by her own child. Then in a well-feigned tone of regret she said that Mrs. Ashleigh was not aware how in the days of Mr. Mortimer's lifetime and long after his death she had striven to make Violet love her by every kindness in her power, but had been constantly repulsed by Violet's morose, unloving disposition and reserved manners, for one

so young, until it had become impossible to try longer to love her. But, as Mrs. Ashleigh said, the past should be forgotten, and she forgave the unconscious injustice she had done her.

"Pardon me, Mrs. Mortimer," said Mrs. Ashleigh, "if I say that though I am aware it may have been impossible for you to love Violet, it cannot be her disposition that is to blame, for the little I yet know of her has clearly shown that she is by nature singularly frank and affectionate, and I wish you to know that it is through no ungenerous complaint of hers that my present resolution has been taken."

It was vain to attempt to argue further, and the matter was settled with an outward appearance of goodwill. Mrs. Ashleigh detected the worldly-wise woman's desire to avoid a quarrel, for it was not possible that Mrs. Mortimer could be so entirely free from anger or indignation as she strove to appear.

Mrs. Ashleigh herself communicated the unexpected intelligence to Violet, who listened as though it were too joyful to be true.

"To live with you always, at Ashleigh Court! Oh, Mrs. Ashleigh!" was her exclamation.

"Yes, Violet, you must very soon be ready to bid good-bye to London and Westford House, and grow accustomed to our north country home. You must call me 'grandmamma' there, my love, as your papa was my godson, you know;" then she added laughingly, "It will remind me how very old I am growing, won't it?"

Before Mrs. Ashleigh left London she wrote to Paris to her son and told him what she had done.

"You must not be annoyed, my dear Norman," she wrote, "at this addition to our small family. You know, my son, that I love and appreciate our delicious privacy as well as you do, but you will agree with me that I am right in taking poor Violet Mortimer from her present home. She is a dear, enthusiastic little creature, though somewhat proud and reserved before strangers. Do not fear to see in her a fascinating young lady; Violet is scarcely more than a child, and so perfectly natural. She has found a place in my heart already, poor little thing, and it is but little:

love and kindness she has had lavished on her since her father's death."

It was arranged that Mrs Ashleigh was to take Violet to her new home after she had paid her promised visit to her Brighton friends. The interval was spent by Violet in the preparations necessary for her departure, and during these last days she was treated with an outward show of kindness by her stepmother and Eleanor, for they knew her influence would be great with Mrs. Ashleigh, and it was wiser to make a friend of her if possible before she left. Inwardly Eleanor rejoiced so much that Violet was going that it was hard to her haughty spirit to act the show of friendship, and yet, mingled with her rejoicing, there burned in her selfish heart a bitter jealousy at the thought of Violet's good fortune in going to Ashleigh Court, surrounded, as she would be, by every luxury, possessing too, as she did, an ample fortune of her own, while she, the beautiful, admired Eleanor Gordon, was comparatively poor.

The night before her departure Violet lay long awake, thinking of the change that was so soon to come in her life. She had grown

familiar with the thought of it now, though at first it had seemed something so new and distant that it could never come to pass. The remembrance of all her father had told her of Ashleigh Court came to her mind again. It was to be her home now with dear Mrs. Ashleigh, and she was to leave this stately London house that she had never learnt to love like the dear country home of her father's lifetime, to which her heart had ever clung fondly.

When Mrs. Ashleigh returned from Brighton and the moment of leaving came, Violet shed tears, for though she could not feel grief at her departure, and though she felt very happy, still the parting moment could not be entirely without pain to one of her deep, loving nature. After all, she was leaving the house which had been her only home (though not a pleasant one) for years, and she was too young and generous to suspect the real cause of the kindness latterly shown her by Mrs. Mortimer and Eleanor, and thought that perhaps now that she was really leaving them they wished to atone for past neglect and unkindness. Inwardly Eleanor pronounced Violet a fool for wasting a tear upon the

occasion. On bidding adieu to Mrs. Ashleigh, Mrs. Mortimer expressed a hope that she would visit them again at some future time, to which Mrs. Ashleigh replied with politeness, but did not return the invitation, as the former had doubtless hoped she would. Violet felt in a bewildered dream as they drove away from Westford House, and within half an hour afterwards she and Mrs. Ashleigh were speeding on their journey northwards.

CHAPTER III.

ASHLEIGH Court was situated in Cumberland, little more than a mile from the sea. The grounds of the estate were sheltered on one side by the neighbouring hills, and on the other the road led down to the shore. The nearest town was three or four miles distant, and the only other habitations just in this part consisted of two or three houses and a few fishing-huts. Ashleigh Court was originally a farmhouse which had belonged for centuries to the Ashleighs, who possessed with it a small private property, but the present spacious mansion had been erected three or four generations back by the then head of the family on the death of a distant relative, who left him an extensive property and a large fortune. Not choosing to remove from the old homestead, Mr. Ashleigh had laid out large sums on building Ashleigh Court, as it at present stood, leaving part of

the old house remaining. The grounds were also extended and embellished, and were now luxuriant with trees and flowers, in spite of the proximity of the sea. The improvements and additions had been continued by Mr. Ashleigh's son and grandson, so that by the time Norman Ashleigh became master of it Ashleigh Court was a beautiful and enviable place of residence, combining, as it did, both the advantages of sea and country air.

It was the month of June now, when Violet Mortimer saw her future home for the first time. Mrs. Ashleigh's carriage met them at the station, and as it was a fine warm evening, Violet enjoyed to the full the beauties of the surrounding scenery, so new to her. As they drew near Ashleigh Court, after their three miles' drive, and the fresh breeze from the sea blew around them, Violet uttered an exclamation of pleasure. Mrs. Ashleigh smiled.

"Now we are really at home at last," she said, "and I am sure we are both very glad, after our long journey. See, my love, you have a view of the house now, through the trees there."

"Oh! how I shall love Ashleigh Court!" exclaimed Violet, as they entered the grounds

and drove up the broad avenue leading to the house, and she saw the place so often described by her dear father, where he had played as a boy and which he had loved in later life. "Dear grandmamma, I feel half afraid of waking and finding myself back in London. What beautiful roses those are growing in front of the house!"

"Yes, they look real enough, don't they, Violet? Norman and I are very fond of roses, and you will find more of them than of any other flower in the gardens, so we shall be very pleased if you share our love for them. Ah! there is Brownson looking out for us. Mrs. Brownson, my love, is my housekeeper. She has lived at Ashleigh Court a great many years; she was with my husband before our marriage even, and I respect her very much and put great confidence in her."

Here the carriage stopped before the pillared entrance, and the housekeeper came down the steps to receive her mistress.

"I hope you are quite well, ma'am; I'm sure we are all pleased to see you back again."

"I am very well indeed, thank you, Brownson. You see, I've not returned alone; this

is Miss Mortimer ; ” and Mrs. Ashleigh turned towards Violet, who looked up smilingly at the housekeeper’s honest, intelligent face.

“ You are very welcome, miss, and I hope I see you well,” said Brownson ; “ you will be such nice company for my mistress. You must excuse my telling you, miss, how well I remember Mr. Mortimer ; you know I was a servant here when he used to be here so much, long before Mr. Norman was born.”

With the privilege of an old, faithful servant, Brownson often called her master “ Mr Norman ” still. Having known him from his birth, she had not yet grown fully accustomed to calling him by his proper title, the one she had been so long used to give his father. When she spoke of Mr. Mortimer, Violet, with the impulse that prompted her to feel friends at once with anyone who had known the father whose memory she cherished so fondly, at once extended her hand to Brownson, with a look in her soft eyes that caused the words, “ God bless you, miss,” to escape almost unconsciously from the old housekeeper. Mrs. Ashleigh took Violet at once up to the little room which was to be her own.

" This is to be your own private little sanc-tum, Violet. You have a sea view from the far window ; I knew you would like that, so I ordered this room to be prepared for you. I will leave you for a few minutes to make your-self at home in it and take off your things, and then you must come down and do justice to the dinner Brownson has provided for us. We are obliged to be fashionable to-night, you see, or else we generally dine early, at two o'clock, when we are alone."

" How kind you are to me, grandmamma ! " said Violet earnestly, looking up at Mrs. Ashleigh.

When she was alone, Violet admiringly in-spected her elegant, comfortable little bedroom, with the snowy white bed, and all looking so different from and so much more homelike than the bare, plain room Mrs. Mortimer had considered sufficient for her in London. From one window she had an extensive view of the beautiful grounds surrounding the house, and the sight of the glorious hills so near filled her with delight ; then, on looking out of the other, and beholding the sea in the distance, she leant out and gazed entranced, enjoying the scene and the sweet evening air, forgetting

everything else for the next few minutes. It was a habit of Violet's, strengthened perhaps by her hitherto lonely life, to become so absorbed by her own thoughts as to render her for the time totally insensible to anything going on around her. All at once she was recalled to herself, and, scarcely knowing how long she had stood there looking out, she hastily threw off her things and ran downstairs, finding Mrs. Ashleigh waiting to show her the way to the dining-room.

"Oh, I am so sorry! Have I kept you waiting long? I quite forgot myself, looking out of the window."

"You are not quite out of the dream yet, isn't that it, my love?" and Mrs. Ashleigh laughed kindly. Well, the best way to convince yourself that you are quite awake is to come at once and eat something substantial," and she led the way to the dining-room, where dinner awaited them.

It was such a lovely evening, and Violet cast such longing glances towards the garden, that when they had dined, Mrs. Ashleigh proposed that they should take a walk through the grounds.

"It will be less fatiguing than going over

the house," she said ; " that we must leave till to-morrow."

They went out, and Violet was charmed with the beauty and verdure all around. Before the house there was a wide-spreading lawn, ornamented with two or three large, shady trees, and the gardens abounded in luxuriant flower beds, and in some parts there were perfect bowers of roses. Retired walks, with the trees meeting overhead, were frequent, and the greenhouses were stocked with rare and beautiful plants. Mrs. Ashleigh paused in their ramble and showed Violet the gate opening on the road that led down to the sea-shore.

" You will take many a stroll down there, I have no doubt, Violet," she said, and then turning round and facing the hills, she added, " and the fine air of our hills will blow some colour into your cheeks, my little city maiden."

As they returned from the orchard, which was situated at the back of the house, Violet looked up for her own room, which was at the side, and saw what she had not discovered before, that roses had been trained to grow up against the wall and would soon peep in at the window.

"Oh! how nice!" she exclaimed; "and I never noticed them when I was in the room; I was too busy looking at the sea."

They went in when it grew dusk and sat together till bedtime, when Mrs. Ashleigh affectionately bade Violet good-night, saying,—

"You must sleep well, you know, Violet, for you will have plenty of walking about to-morrow. You know you are to have entire holiday for the next two or three months, before we begin to think of governesses or lessons. You are sure you don't repent, my love, of coming to this lonely place, with only an old lady like me to keep you company as yet?"

"You know I don't, grandmamma, you know I don't want anyone but you," and the happy, grateful tears glistened in Violet's brown eyes as she added very earnestly, "Ashleigh Court feels more like my old home with papa than Westford House ever did."

And Violet was right; as yet she had no other wish than to be here in her new beautiful home, near the hills and the sea, alone with Mrs. Ashleigh. Her young heart was yet undisturbed by visions of other or greater

happiness, and before she went to sleep that night Violet poured forth her simple but earnest thanksgiving for the home and dear friend she had found.

A month since she had seemed as far from becoming acquainted with Mrs. Ashleigh as ever, and now she was here, knowing and loving her dearly, and established with her at Ashleigh Court, of which she had heard so much and which she had so often pictured to her own fancy.

"It is just such a place as Eleanor would like to be mistress of," she thought, "but too quiet, too lonely for her," for Eleanor did not care for the sea or for the beautiful scenery, and had always sneered contemptuously at what she called "Violet's foolish rhapsodies" on such subjects.

Violet could not help feeling glad that Norman Ashleigh was away for the present and that she was entirely alone with Mrs. Ashleigh, for she would the sooner feel thoroughly at home, having been so little accustomed to strangers, gentlemen especially.

It was a lovely morning when she awoke from her sound sleep after her unusually long journey of the day before. Everything looked

gloriously fresh and bright when she gazed out and opened her window to admit the sweet morning air.

Mrs. Ashleigh met her with a smile and a kiss as she went downstairs, and after breakfast took her on the promised tour of inspection through the house. They visited first the old part which stood at the back, and Violet was deeply interested in the old-fashioned rooms and quaint nooks of which it consisted. The rooms were scarcely ever used now, as they were not required, but they were kept furnished just as they had been in old times. As they came again into the new part, the lofty and elegant apartments formed a striking contrast to those they had just left. Violet was delighted at the sight of the library and the stores of books it contained. Mrs. Ashleigh saw her look of pleasure.

"I am glad you are fond of reading, Violet," she said; "it will enable you to pass pleasantly and with profit many an hour you might otherwise feel dull. Until winter comes you had better take your books out of doors and make the garden your reading room, my love. You see I am very anxious for you to grow

strong and rosy by the time you begin lessons again."

When they went upstairs Mrs. Ashleigh took Violet to her own private sitting-room, a small, beautifully furnished apartment, situated at the side of the house and commanding a view of the grounds and the sea, like Violet's bedroom. There was a piano in one corner, which Mrs. Ashleigh opened as she said,—

"This is Norman's own special piano. It has the sweetest tone of all our pianos. My son is a very good musician, and for my sake he keeps his pet instrument here and often gives me a musical treat. I shall have you now to join in my pleasure, love, when he comes home again."

Violet was passionately fond of music, and it was with lively pleasure she heard that Norman Ashleigh could play. How many pleasures she loved were being given to her all at once! "I shall *so* enjoy hearing him, grandmamma," she said aloud.

The wide, spacious landing outside Mrs. Ashleigh's room, leading to the principal staircase, was lighted by a handsome skylight, and the wall on one side was hung with

two or three paintings. The largest and most prominently placed attracted Violet's attention. It was a life-size portrait of a young cavalier dressed in the costume of two hundred years back. The face was one of extreme beauty, very young, but wearing a solemn expression of stern resolution, and Violet's eyes were riveted on it in admiration.

"Oh, what a handsome face! who is it, grandmamma? I like it so much, though it looks so sorrowful and almost stern!"

"You like that face, Violet? Well, I am very glad, for you will like Norman, because he is considered to bear a strong resemblance to this portrait, and I myself see the likeness, sometimes stronger than others, for you must not think he always looks so solemn as this. It is the portrait of Rupert Ashleigh, one of Norman's ancestors, who fell at Naseby, fighting for King Charles. The Ashleighs were not very rich then, you know, Violet, but they were an old, respectable family, and they were staunch Royalists. The best and only gift they could offer to the service of the king they gave willingly, and that was their youngest son. They had but two, and the eldest was in weakly, delicate health, and

had a wife and children, but Rupert was a brave youth, burning with ardour to fight and, if need be, to lay down his young life for his sovereign. It is said that his mother felt that her brave son would never return to her, and this picture of him was completed shortly before his departure from home. No wonder he looks sorrowful at the thought of the coming separation; and then, too, all loyal hearts must have been filled with anxiety for the king's cause and desire to see it triumph. From the hour he left them to join the royal army his parents never saw their young Rupert again. He was killed, as I have told you, at the battle of Naseby, with so many others of Charles's adherents."

Violet listened with glowing cheeks as Mrs. Ashleigh told her the short history of Rupert Ashleigh, and her eyes remained fixed in enthusiastic admiration on the portrait of the youthful warrior.

"Grandmamma, what a treasure this picture must have been to them all after his death! He deserved to have the same name as Prince Rupert, did he not?"

"Yes, my love, and I daresay he felt justly proud that he was called by the name of that

gallant Prince. The Ashleighs have always had a great affection for this picture, and it has hung here ever since this new part of Ashleigh Court was built, because the light falls well upon it just here. Is it not strange that my son should resemble so strongly a member of his family who lived so long ago? But I believe such likenesses do occur, and I do not think it is fancy. When Norman was a boy he used to tell us that if war were to break out, he should feel bound to complete his resemblance to Rupert Ashleigh by enlisting and getting killed as speedily as possible. He used to laugh at us then for seeing the likeness at all. My dear son! may his life be longer and happier than poor Rupert Ashleigh's!"

Mrs. Ashleigh spoke the concluding words very tenderly and solemnly, and the tears glistened in her eyes as she thought of her absent son, loved with such a deep affection. Violet looked up, and placing her little hand softly in Mrs. Ashleigh's, went downstairs with her again. Norman Ashleigh was like that picture! The face was one such as Violet loved to fancy her favourite heroes must have possessed.

"He must be very handsome, your son," she said aloud, and looking up again quite simply.

"Well, he is, Violet, though I say it who should not. Altogether, allowing for the difference of dress, and that Norman has not, of course, Rupert's long love-locks, there is a striking resemblance between them. I was afraid, my love, you would think my son rather haughty and stern-looking at first, as many do; but it is only at times he looks so, and you must not mind it. Poor Norman! he had a trouble of his own some years ago, and for a long time after he did look very sad and stern, but it has passed now, thank God, and he is himself again. He is a good son to me, Violet."

"How could he help being good to you, grandmamma?" and Violet looked up earnestly and lovingly into Mrs. Ashleigh's face.

Mrs. Ashleigh caressingly smoothed Violet's dark, wavy hair.

"And you, too, my dear girl, love me and are very good to me, and you will be a daughter to me, the same as if you were really my own. But," she added, after a pause, "how serious we are getting, Violet;

suppose we find our way down to the sea before dinner? There, run away and put on your hat, and we will go."

The road direct to the shore was for the first half mile or more pretty good, running between fields and hedges, but as it neared the sea, it became rough and sandy, for it was a somewhat wild, lonely part of the coast. The women and children standing about the doors of the fishermen's cottages curtsied to Mrs. Ashleigh and Violet as they passed.

"Here we are at last!" exclaimed Violet. "Oh! I do so love that sound of the waves," and she darted forwards. "But the tide is going out very fast, grandmamma, and you cannot go out there on the wet sand."

Mrs. Ashleigh laughed.

"Well, no, I don't think I can. You see I am getting old, Violet, and I cannot step so nimbly across the stones as I used to do, and as you can do now, so I will stay here and wait for you."

She sat down on a mound of dry, pebbly sand, and Violet began to make her way to the water, laughing merrily as she turned now and then to look back at Mrs. Ashleigh. In a short time she stood close to the splash-

ing waves, and as the spray dashed in her face, she inhaled the strong breeze with a wild sense of delight and freedom. Mrs. Ashleigh sat watching intently the small, graceful figure in the distance, the light summer dress wafted about by the breeze, and very earnest were the thoughts that passed through her mind as she gazed.

How thankful she felt that she had been the means of rescuing Violet from her lonely, unloved existence and bringing her where she hoped and trusted to make her very happy. The young girl had become very dear to her in so short a time, even for her own sake, and Mrs. Ashleigh now breathed a fervent prayer that she herself might be spared to watch over her at least until she found a happier home and more loving protector than those she had just quitted. In a few minutes Violet returned, glowing with the exercise, and Mrs. Ashleigh exclaimed as she looked at her,—

“Why, Violet, the air seems to have done you good already! Sit down here and rest a little before we return.”

“Grandmamma,” said Violet, laughing, “you don’t think me a great baby, do you?”

I always enjoy a ramble like that, going out with the tide, I call it. They say that one gets weary even of a good thing, if one can have it always ; but I could never tire of the sea, never ; it is always fresh and beautiful," and Violet rested her chin on her hands and gazed out very earnestly on to the wide expanse before her. "Grandmamma," she said suddenly, "don't you think I ought to write to them to-day ? They would like to know we arrived safely, and I must tell them what a beautiful place Ashleigh Court is, and how happy I am."

"I was going to say so to you, my love. You know I wish you to write very regularly to Mrs. Mortimer, for though, unhappily, she has not done all her duty by you, nor cared to gain your love, still she has a claim on you, and if I should be taken from you, my dear child, your home would be again with her, and it may incline her more kindly to you if she sees you do not resent her neglect of you. But beyond this she cannot expect. I cannot, even if she looks for it, invite her and her daughter to Ashleigh Court. It is my son's house, and he is not fond of company, and Eleanor Gordon is not exactly the kind

of girl I should wish as a companion for you, Violet. It may be different as years go on, but for some time, at least, it will be best for all parties that we should not see much of each other. You have not complained much, but if I am not mistaken, Eleanor Gordon has been, even more than her mother, the means of rendering your life unhappy and neglected; but I am anxious to keep in charity with them both, if possible. Violet, my love, I have told you all this now, so that you will know how to meet any advances Mrs. Mortimer or Eleanor may make in their letters. It is not a pleasant subject, but life is not all made up of happiness, though *we* are going to try and be very happy together, in spite of all."

"I understand all you have said," said Violet in a low voice. "Thank you, grandmamma."

"Sitting here with you, Violet, reminds me so much of the days long ago when your dear papa was so fond of coming to this very spot. Charley Mortimer, as he was always called, used to be a great favourite with my husband, and many a long walk they have taken together along the shore here. That was

long before Norman was born, you know, and my dear husband used to say that if he had had a boy he should have liked such a one as bright-eyed Charley Mortimer. I ought to feel very old, Violet, should I not, looking at you, the daughter of that boy. But it seems such a short time ago, when I recall those days, that I can hardly imagine so much has happened since."

"Grandmamma, you were papa's friend then, and now you are mine. What would either of us have done without you to love us?"

CHAPTER IV.

VIOLET's life was very, very full of happiness now. Like a tender flower brought from a cold, sunless garden to its proper warm, congenial soil, her whole nature seemed to bloom out and rejoice under the kindly influence of her new home. She was never sad or lonely now that she could roam at will by the sea-shore, and take long, delicious rambles over the breezy hills with Norman Ashleigh's large dog for her protector, or sometimes, when she was not going too far, accompanied by Mrs. Ashleigh. London, with its teeming life and bustle, had never been rendered pleasant and homelike to Violet. No one had won her to love it and to forget the happy country home of her early childhood, and hence, on coming to Ashleigh Court, she felt restored, as it were, to her natural element, and under its cheering influence her young enthusiastic spirit experienced a sweet

sense of freedom and enjoyment. It was very beautiful to see the affection, strong and deep, that existed between the young girl and her kind protectress. Violet's true, loving heart and her generous, yet independent spirit, had endeared her strangely to Mrs. Ashleigh, who would often encourage her to talk to her of those poetic fancies and favourite studies which had formed her world, as it were, in London, and which she had long ago learnt never to mention before Mrs. Mortimer and Eleanor. Violet wrote regularly to her old home, and as her letters were always kindly, it was much too soon yet for her stepmother and Eleanor to let any disappointment appear that no intention of the kind they had hoped for was ever alluded to by Violet. Eleanor professed to her mother to believe that it was owing to Violet's influence that Mrs. Ashleigh held aloof from them, though in her heart she well knew Violet's generous character, and disliked her all the more for possessing it.

W——, the nearest town to Morton, the name of the part of the coast near to which Ashleigh Court stood, was, as mentioned before, almost four miles distant, and Mrs. Ashleigh and Violet did not drive there often except on

Sundays to church. Mrs. Ashleigh had one or two acquaintances residing in the houses adjacent to her own; but the only one with whom she was on terms of intimate friendship was a young widow lady whose husband had died about a year previous to Violet's coming to Ashleigh Court, leaving her with two little children. Mrs. Arnott, as she was named, took a great fancy to Violet from the first, and made her promise to come and see her very often. She was an engaging, amiable young creature, and her sweet, sad face drew Violet's heart to her at once. She lived at a small, pretty house about a quarter of a mile from Ashleigh Court, and Mrs. Ashleigh was glad to let Violet go there often and enliven and amuse the young widow. Violet had become a great favourite with all Mrs. Ashleigh's household, for she had never contracted Eleanor's habit of treating servants with contempt. With good Mrs. Brownson especially she was a favourite, and the old housekeeper was very fond of telling Violet all she remembered of her father.

One day when Mrs. Ashleigh was confined to her room with a cold, Violet came with a commission from her to Mrs. Brownson, and

the latter began to talk about days gone by as the young girl lingered with her. "My poor master!" she said, "he was very fond of young Mr. Mortimer, as he was then, you know, miss. We all knew it was a disappointment to him and my mistress that they had no children of their own, though they were too good ever to say much about it. I shall never forget my master's delight when Mr. Norman was born, nor Mrs. Ashleigh's either. You know, miss, my master only lived to see his son ten years old, and so proud of him as he was, for he was as fine a lad as he is a young man now. But my master, on his deathbed, said he was happier to die than he would have been if he left no son who might live to take care of Mrs. Ashleigh and be a comfort to her. It was very solemn, miss ; I was in the room when Mr. Ashleigh took poor Master Norman's hand, and put it into his mother's, and bade him never forget his dying words, that he should be a good son, and never speak so much as an ungrateful word to her, and then my master prayed that her only child might be spared to her, as he himself must leave her. And, Miss Mortimer, my young master never has forgotten his

promise that I heard him make to his dying father (crying very hard, poor little fellow), for if ever a son loved his mother, Mr. Norman loves his. When he is away, miss, even for pleasure for a short time, like he is now, *I* can see how anxious she is, and how she longs for him to come back to her. She does not tell it out loud, and you would not guess it, perhaps ; but I have known her such a long time, miss, and I can see it. When Mr. Norman comes home, you will see that she will be even more bright and cheerful than she is now. It used to be so when he was a lad and came home for his holidays, for my mistress did not keep him at home, but sent him to a public school, because she knew it was best for him, miss. Sometimes I fancy she would like him to marry, for his own sake, not hers ; but I don't know how it is, I think he never will. I've thought so more than ever the last three or four years. He does not seem to care about anything that way ; he is very proud ; it is his great fault, excuse me for saying so, miss, and perhaps he would never find anyone who could make him so happy as his mother does. Not but that there's many would be only too glad to try," added Mrs. Brownson,

with a touch of pride, as though she had a share in the ownership of her young master. "He is so noble and really kind, that everyone is sure to like him, miss."

"Mrs. Brownson," asked Violet, "is that serious look often on his face, I mean the look that makes him so like the portrait of Rupert Ashleigh?"

"Well, miss, it is when he is offended or when anything angers him. He is least like that picture, of course, when he smiles or laughs; indeed he hardly looks like it at all then."

Violet remembered what Mrs. Ashleigh had said about her son having had some trouble a few years before; but her innate delicacy prevented her from wishing or seeking to know anything more of what had been named in confidence.

"I hope he will soon come home then, Mrs. Brownson," she said, "for Mrs. Ashleigh's sake."

As Violet left her, the old housekeeper looked after her, saying to herself,—

"I wonder what my young master will think of her! He cares very little now about young ladies' company, to be sure; but he

can't object to a sweet young thing like she is, and she is hardly to be called a young lady yet. He is sure to be kind and attentive to her for my mistress's sake ; and with that way she has of looking at one with those beautiful eyes of hers, I don't see he can help soon liking her for her own."

As she went upstairs, Violet thought of what Brownson had said to her, and the idea came into her head that perhaps Norman Ashleigh on his return might find her presence under his roof distasteful to him. She was a stranger to him, and he might not like the intrusion upon the privacy he had so long enjoyed with his mother. He would be too gentlemanly to show it, of course, and he would endure her society for Mrs. Ashleigh's sake, knowing, as he would, how she loved her. With these unpleasant imaginations Violet contrived to render her proud young heart very disturbed and uneasy, and her face was very grave when she entered Mrs. Ashleigh's room. The latter noticed it, saying,—

" Why, Violet, my love, you look as if you were scarcely out of a brown study. What a serious face you have on ! "

" Have I, grandmamma ? " and Violet

laughed so merrily that Mrs Ashleigh thought she had only fancied it all. Violet could not tell her dear protectress what was troubling her; it might seem ungrateful and perhaps foolish, for she might be quite mistaken, after all. Opportunely, as though it were sent to reassure her, Mrs. Ashleigh said,—

“I have not told you, Violet, that I have had a letter from Norman this morning. He is really coming home soon now, though he cannot exactly say when yet. He sends a special message to you, my love, to say that he will be very happy indeed to make your acquaintance, and hopes to find that you have made yourself quite at home before his return.”

“Will you tell him I thank him, and that it is very kind of him to say so, grandmamma,” replied Violet, smiling.

“I will, Violet, when I write to-day. And now run away at once and go out. It is so warm that I may be tempted to go out myself this afternoon in spite of my cold.”

Violet would have stayed with her, but Mrs. Ashleigh would not consent to her remaining in her warm room all the morning, so she left her, passing the picture of Rupert Ashleigh on her way downstairs. Her first impression of the

portrait had never been effaced, and she rarely passed it without looking at it. Apart from her admiration of the face, the thought of the early but glorious fate of the loyal young cavalier attracted all the romantic enthusiasm of her nature, and this picture was her favourite of all that Ashleigh Court contained. In a few days now she would see Norman Ashleigh, who was thought so like it, and for Mrs. Ashleigh's sake she felt glad he was so soon returning. On her own account she could not repress a sigh as she thought how much of her loved guardian's society she must relinquish now, for Violet resolved to obtrude herself as little as possible upon Norman Ashleigh and his mother when they were together. His kind message of the morning had somewhat reassured her, and taking a book from the library, she strolled into the grounds, where the warm, sweet breeze nearly drove all her uneasiness away. She walked down to see Mrs. Arnott, whom she found in her pretty garden with her children. The young widow always rejoiced to see Violet coming, and loved to hear her talk to her and see her play with the little ones.

"Mr. Ashleigh is coming home very soon.

now, Mrs. Arnott," said Violet, in the course of their conversation, "in a few days, I think."

"Ah, how delighted Mrs. Ashleigh will be! I am always pleased to see him, Violet, for he was a great friend of Harry's. Norman Ashleigh is nearly as old now as my dear husband was when he died. He is twenty-five, and Harry was only twenty-six when I lost him," and the low, sweet voice faltered for a moment. "Violet, love, when you grow up and are married, and have a husband you love as I did mine, may he be spared to you longer than mine was to me!"

CHAPTER V.

ONE day, a week later, when Violet had been at Ashleigh Court nearly three months, the post arrived, as usual, and a short time afterwards Mrs. Ashleigh called Violet into her room. She held a letter in her hand as Violet entered, and there was a bright, pleased smile on her venerable countenance.

“ What do you think, my love ? Norman is coming home to-morrow. He is staying a day or two in Staffordshire on his way, on business. Most of our property is situated there, you know, Violet. He cannot arrive in W—— until half-past nine, so it will be after ten o’clock when he arrives home.”

“ How glad he’ll be to see you again, grandmamma ! It is well he did not come last week, when you had such a cold. It made you look so different from what you really are, that he would have thought your beauty had all gone while he was away,” and Violet

laughingly kissed Mrs. Ashleigh, who smiled at the fond little flatterer.

"If I grow vain in my old age, Violet, you must answer for it, remember. Do you know, love, I told Norman at first that he would find you a colourless little brunette, and now the sea and the air of our hills have sent the roses into your cheeks, my "little nut-brown maid."

And so there were scarcely two more days alone with dear grandmamma for Violet. The young master of Ashleigh Court was coming home, and Violet began to wonder whether she would like him or not. And the uneasy thoughts that had troubled her before came to her again, though she told herself they were foolish.

She was writing to Eleanor that day, but she merely alluded to Norman's return, with the few words, "Mr. Ashleigh is coming home to-morrow. It will be late in the evening when he arrives."

She took Norman's dog Carlo out with her that day. "Old fellow," she said, patting him, "your master is coming home to-morrow, and you know nothing about it. You won't care much for me then when you have him, Carlo."

The morrow came, and Violet saw in Mrs. Ashleigh's face the unmistakable look of gladness at the thought of seeing her son so soon. The day proved wet, so that they could not, as they intended, go to Mrs. Arnott's to tell her of Norman's expected return, and they were forced to sit together all the day, her last day alone with "dear grandmamma," as Violet kept telling herself with a sigh. Violet had resolved to go to bed before Norman arrived, and thus let him spend the first hours after his arrival alone with his mother, as no doubt he would prefer to do. They would have so much to say, and she would not obtrude on them.

"What a cheerless night for Norman!" said Mrs. Ashleigh, as she and Violet sat, after tea, looking out of the window, while the rain continued to fall. "The next wet evening, my love, we shall have Norman to entertain us and give us some music. He will be so pleased that you can sing, Violet."

When it drew near half-past nine, Violet said she felt rather tired, and thought she would like to go to bed, if "grandmamma" would excuse her waiting up.

"And so you want to run away from

Norman, my love?" asked Mrs. Ashleigh, smiling; "shall I tell him he frightened you off so early?"

"I shall see him in the morning, grandmamma, won't that do?" and Violet could not be persuaded to wait up.

"Then if you really would rather go, love," said Mrs. Ashleigh, seeing she was in earnest, "I will not ask you to sit up. These dull days in the house do very often tire one."

So Violet retired before ten, and it was not until after she had gone that the real cause of her going so early struck Mrs. Ashleigh, that she imagined she would be *de trop* on Norman's arrival.

"Why did I not think of it before? Dear little Violet! she has been so long accustomed to be slighted that she is over sensitive in fearing to obtrude."

Violet had been in bed some minutes when she heard the carriage drive up the avenue, and she knew that Norman Ashleigh was at home.

She woke early the next morning and found the sun shining brightly and the gardens looking deliciously fresh after the rain. It was her custom on fine mornings to get up and take a walk before breakfast, so this

morning she rose and dressed and was in the garden soon after eight o'clock. Breakfast was not until nine, so she had time for a walk down to the sea. Carlo generally accompanied her when she went that distance so early, but she did not call him this morning ; Mr. Ashleigh might perhaps want him, she thought. So she set out alone, and walked slowly to the gate leading into the road to the shore, lingering on her way to smell the flowers and admire the fresh verdure of the grass after the showers of the previous day. She stood looking out into the road a minute or two before opening the gate. "What a pity summer will be over so soon !" she thought, with a half sigh.

"Good morning, Miss Mortimer."

Violet started and turned round, and, looking up into the speaker's face, knew it was Norman Ashleigh who stood beside her. She had been thinking rather nervously ever since she got up that she must meet him at breakfast, and here he was, come upon her all at once, by surprise, and she stood, not knowing what to say, looking at him with a shy, half-frightened gaze. He was tall and slender and very graceful in figure, and her first glance at his

face showed her that everyone was right, that he *was* like the portrait of Rupert Ashleigh. He had the same pale, proud face, piercing grey eyes, dark and full of expression, and the same aquiline nose. The lower part of the face was like too, firm and resolute. His hair was very black and rather long, and he wore neither beard nor whiskers, only a short moustache on the somewhat haughty upper lip. He evidently saw Violet's embarrassment, for he took her hand kindly, smiling as he did so, and as he smiled, the resemblance to the picture faded.

"I am obliged to introduce myself to you, you see, Miss Mortimer, as you ran away from me last night," he said. "You are out early this morning."

"I am going down to the shore," said Violet, still very shyly.

"That is a long walk before breakfast—for a young lady."

There was a stress on the last words which Violet did not like, so, overcoming her shyness, she replied rather indignantly,—

"I don't think so; I am accustomed to it; I often go on fine mornings like this."

He looked amused at her indignation, and said smilingly,—

“I must confess to being like you in that respect, Miss Mortimer. This lovely morning tempted me out, and seeing you before me, I overtook you, thinking you must be a kindred spirit. Will you allow me to accompany you in your walk this morning? You see I am determined on making your acquaintance, though you don’t seem to care very much about mine.”

Violet blushed. Was she appearing ungracious to him? She did not wish to do so, living in his house, and loving his mother so dearly, especially as she felt he was perhaps exerting himself against his inclination to be agreeable to her. So she raised her soft brown eyes to his face and said gently,—

“If you like to come I shall be very glad.”

He opened the gate for her, and they were soon walking down the road together.

“Did you not find it lonely at first, living here at Ashleigh Court, after having lived in town all your life before?”

“Not all my life,” answered Violet quickly; “until papa died we lived in the country; I was more than ten years old when we left it.”

"Ah, of course; I had forgotten," and Norman spoke very kindly now.

"It was a beautiful place where we lived," Violet went on, emboldened by his kind tone; "not like this, of course, because it was not near the sea or the mountains, but still it *was* beautiful."

"Rose Vale, it was called, was it not?" asked Norman, smiling.

"Ah, you know, then!" and Violet looked up with a pleased, earnest glance into her companion's face. "We had so many rose-trees there; papa and I were very fond of roses, and I was so glad when I first came and saw that you liked them here too at Ashleigh Court."

"And then you feel quite accustomed to the country, and are not afraid to walk alone in our lonely roads?"

"Oh, no," replied Violet smiling; "besides, Mrs. Ashleigh is often with me. We come and sit on the shore together very often."

"Do you ride, Miss Mortimer?" asked Norman, after a pause.

"I used to do, long ago, before papa died. I had a pony then, but I had to give up riding when we went to live in London. I could not

have the pony so well in town, you know," and Violet turned away slightly so that Norman might not see her face. It was always painful to the sensitive girl to recall those days of parting from the home and objects she had loved with all her childhood's affection.

The young man's deep grey eyes were bent with an expression of interest on the girlish figure by his side. He knew the story of her lonely life since her father's death, and a glimpse of the proud generosity of her character was shown to him as she thus attempted to conceal her pain at the past unkindness she had suffered, and tried to pass off to him as a natural event that act of her stepmother's which had caused her childish heart such grief at the time. He affected not to notice her embarrassment, and by the time they reached the shore Violet's shyness was entirely gone, and she talked freely in spite of herself to this Norman Ashleigh, whom she had felt so afraid of meeting. They wandered a short way northwards under the shadow of the cliffs, and Norman made Violet rest on a projecting ledge of rock while he stood by her side leaning against the cliff.

"How beautiful it is to-day!" exclaimed

Violet, gazing at the roaring white-crested waves as they swept up within a few yards of where they were sitting, retreating farther each time, as the tide was going out.

“ You are fond of the sea ? ”

“ Oh, yes ! ” and Violet’s brown eyes spoke more than her words.

“ You are quite at home now at Ashleigh Court, I hope ? My mother thinks so.

“ Ah, yes, I have been so happy, all alone with dear grandmamma, ever since I came.”

Violet half regretted her speech the moment it was uttered. Had not her words sounded rather egotistically, and did he know that she called his mother “ grandmamma,” and would he think her foolish in so styling her in conversation with him ?

Norman looked at her rather keenly and said half in jest, Violet thought somewhat bitterly too,—

“ Confess, Miss Mortimer, that you are sorry I have come to disturb your happiness, and that you do not thank me for returning home so soon.”

“ Mr. Ashleigh, you cannot think I meant that ; I wish you would not say so,” and

Violet spoke very earnestly, blushing with annoyance that she had not expressed herself differently, and for an instant she thought him unkind to have embarrassed her thus.

But Norman smiled at the reproachful face that looked up to his, and his tone was one of great gentleness as he said,—

“Then forgive me, Miss Mortimer. If we are to be good friends, it will not do to begin to quarrel so soon. Home is very pleasant again after even my short absence, and I am schoolboy enough yet, you see, to be glad to return to my mother, and be spoiled, as in the old college days.”

And Norman Ashleigh folded his arms and was silent as he gazed fixedly out before him, and Violet saw that he was thinking deeply and seemed for the time unconscious of her presence. The likeness to Rupert Ashleigh was very strong then, with that deep, fixed look on his countenance, and Violet’s gaze was almost unconsciously riveted on its beauty. She was strongly attracted, even thus early, by Norman Ashleigh, she could scarcely have told why, for twice already he had occasioned her to think him sarcastic and somewhat unkind. But then had he not had power to

make her forget her indignation so soon, and had she not been powerless to resist him ? It might be said that her youth and ignorance of the world caused her to be so soon charmed by a stranger, but it was something more than even that that made Violet feel that Norman Ashleigh was unlike anyone she had ever seen, that his face was one of greater beauty than she had ever beheld, such as she would have loved to bestow on the favourite heroes of her fancy, and that, with its power of expression, it attracted her more than the still, stern countenance of the youthful warrior's portrait that he so much resembled.

“ Miss Mortimer,” exclaimed Norman, suddenly awakening from his reverie, “ pardon me ; the sound of those waves is like a lullaby. We must return home if we are to have any breakfast, which we undoubtedly deserve after our walk and after having accomplished an acquaintanceship so well without an introduction.”

And Violet thought that the way home had never seemed so short before as it did now, with Norman talking to her and occasionally relating an anecdote of his late tour. As they entered the grounds of Ashleigh Court Carlo

came bounding forwards and sprang upon his master, delighted to see him again.

"Poor old fellow! And so you are pleased to see me, are you? But your demonstrations of affection are rather rough, Mr. Carlo," and Norman freed himself from the dog, who seemed now inclined to honour Violet with a similar embrace; but his master interfered. "Down, sir! How dare you be so rude to a lady? He seems very fond of you, Miss Mortimer."

Violet laughed.

"We are used to each other, aren't we, Carlo? Do not send him away from me, Mr. Ashleigh; we are great friends."

"I must thank you very much for taking him out so often and giving him exercise during my absence."

"He was no trouble, you know, Mr. Ashleigh, and he always comes to take care of me when I go rambling on the hills there. I feel quite safe with him."

"Well, sometimes in future you must let both Carlo and his master accompany you. My mother tells me that of course she has not liked you to venture too far with only old Carlo for your protector, faithful as he

is, and she herself cannot go about quite so much as she used to do, though she is well and strong still, thank God," and Norman spoke the concluding words very earnestly.

"Thank you, Mr. Ashleigh. I shall be so glad to see more of those hills; I am so fond of them, and I often wish I could go further among them."

Here they spied Mrs. Ashleigh standing on the terrace outside the breakfast-room window.

"Ah!" said Norman, "there is my mother, surprised, no doubt, to see us together."

Mrs. Ashleigh came smilingly forward to meet them.

"You are too late, mother, you see. Miss Mortimer and I became acquainted an hour ago;" and Norman bent to kiss his mother, who said, laughing,—

"How sly you have been! But I guessed you must both be out when I came down and found neither of you. So I am spared the trouble of an introduction, and I can only hope you will be henceforth good friends. What a beautiful morning to greet your return home, Norman!"

"And Miss Mortimer and I have duly shown our appreciation of it, mother mine."

Violet liked to look at Norman's face as he spoke thus, fondly and playfully to his mother.

That day was full of interest and new pleasure to Violet.

When evening came, and they all sat together in Mrs. Ashleigh's sitting-room, Norman entertained them with stories of his tour and accounts of the persons he had met, and Violet listened attentively to his descriptions of those places of which she had heard and read, but which seemed so very strange and far off to her.

Had she not known it before, she would have seen now Mrs. Ashleigh's great love for her son, shown in every look that rested so proudly on his fine face and noble form, and in the gladness she could not conceal at his return. She was standing by his chair during a pause in the conversation, her hand playing fondly with his dark locks.

"Do you know, Norman, I have been giving Violet very grand accounts of your musical powers, and am going to ask you now to exhibit them," and she went to her son's piano and opened it.

"You will not find it rusty, Norman. Violet has kept it in tune for you. Now, do

your best," she said, merrily, " or Violet will be disappointed."

" Pray don't be, Miss Mortimer," and Norman looked smilingly at Violet as he rose and went to the piano. Violet moved nearer and stood with Mrs. Ashleigh by Norman as he played with a master touch that caused her to listen in rapt delight. As he played on, passing from one air to another without speaking, Violet could hardly restrain an exclamation of pleasure, and when he ceased and half turned round from the instrument, she said at once, " Oh ! thank you, Mr. Ashleigh," so very earnestly, that Norman looked at her fixedly for a moment, and seeing the real pleasure and emotion in her soft brown eyes, he said kindly,—

" I am very glad, indeed, to have afforded you pleasure. Do you know, mother, I never meet with a piano I like so well as this. It is because it is an old friend, I suppose," he added, with a smile.

" Very likely, Norman," and then turning to Violet, Mrs. Ashleigh took her hand, as she said, " Now, my love, you will give us a song, won't you ? "

" Of course she will, mother. I was just

going to ask her," and Norman rose from the piano ; but Violet hesitated, for she felt somewhat nervous and afraid to sing so soon before Norman, himself so good a musician.

"I would rather not sing to-night, grandmamma."

"Why, Violet ! I shall think you really are afraid of Norman, after all."

"Am I so very terrible, Miss Mortimer ? "

But though he smiled as he spoke, and as Violet looked up at him, she thought Norman might be offended if she still refused, and it struck her that it was foolish of her to imagine that he could expect much from her. So she went to the piano and sat down.

"What shall I sing, grandmamma ? "

"You have so many pretty songs, my love, but I think that little Swiss air is one of the best. It is very sweet."

So Violet sang, timidly at first, and gaining confidence as she went on. Her voice was not very powerful yet, but very sweet and soft, and she had a great power of expression which always made Mrs. Ashleigh love to hear her, and caused Norman to listen full of pleasure and with deep interest.

"Thank you," he said earnestly as she

finished ; “ you must not think me tiresome if I often ask you to sing in future, will you ? ” and as Violet looked up she met the gaze of Norman’s grey eyes bent kindly upon her.

“ Oh, no, Mr. Ashleigh,” she replied, blushing with pleasure.

“ Violet has had all the burden of entertaining me with her music ever since she came,” said Mrs. Ashleigh ; adding to Violet, “ Norman will share it with you now, love.”

That night Violet retired a few minutes before Mrs. Ashleigh and Norman, and when she was gone, the former said to her son,—

“ Well, Norman, I do not think you will quarrel with me for the addition to our family, for giving Violet a home in your house ? ”

The young man’s gaze rested tenderly on his mother’s face as he replied,—

“ My house, mother, is yours too, and whoever you may bring here must always be welcomed by me, but apart from this, Miss Mortimer is very interesting, and able to win a welcome for her own sake. But she is so young yet ; how may she not change when she has seen the world a little ? At her age I have no doubt others were just

as perfectly guileless and unaffected," and Norman spoke bitterly just then.

Mrs. Ashleigh placed her hand softly on her son's arm. "Scarcely, Norman, for if I mistake not, whatever may be her faults, Violet must always be true-hearted and generous. Norman, I hoped you had forgotten long ago," and his mother looked at him with anxious solicitude.

"And so I have, do not fear, mother," replied Norman quickly and earnestly. "I am glad, for your sake," he added smiling, "that Miss Mortimer is what she is, for if she had been the most disagreeable girl imaginable, and yet lonely and neglected, you would have taken her under your wing all the same, and have tried to make her happy, though she might not have crept into your heart as this little girl seems to have done."

"God has blessed me with love and happiness always, Norman. Could I do less than extend them to one who had a claim on me, and yet was so bereft of both?"

As Violet went upstairs to bed she had paused with her candle in her hand to look at Rupert Ashleigh's portrait again now that she had seen Norman. Yes, they were very much

alike, but the face of the picture was but still and changeless, while the beauty of Norman's was enhanced by the power of varying expression. Though not feeling quite at home with him yet, Violet felt her shyness towards him rapidly disappearing, and again she wondered at the happiness that surrounded her now, so unlike the old life in London, when she had dreamed and read and amused herself all alone, and no one had cared whether she were happy or otherwise.

CHAPTER VI.

AND the next day, when Mrs. Brownson said to her,—

“ Well, you like my young master, don’t you, Miss ? ”

Violet answered,—

“ Yes, Mrs. Brownson, I am sure I shall like him.”

Very often now in her rambles Violet was accompanied by Norman, and under his protection she explored and wandered farther among the hills and valleys surrounding her new home than she had hitherto done. Gradually her shyness and half dread of Norman wore away completely, for he was always constant in his kindness to her, and there was something about him new to Violet, something which told her, young as she was and little as she knew of the world, that he was wholly unlike and superior to the fashionable dandies whom she had seen occasionally at her stepmother’s entertainments, to which

Eleanor's beauty as much as Mrs. Mortimer's invitation attracted them.

It may perhaps have been at first his devotion to his mother and consequently a wish to show kindness to her *protégé*, that made proud Norman Ashleigh exert himself to amuse and show kindness to the young girl whose home was now under his roof. It may have been so, and he told himself it was so ; but certain it is that before two or three weeks were passed, Norman was aware that Violet's society was agreeable to him for her own sake, for she interested him strongly in spite of himself. He took pleasure in making her talk and in hearing how stoutly she could defend her opinion of anything if he asked her to give it. He would lead her on to speak of herself, and sometimes before she was aware of it she was telling him of her past life, of her love for her father, and often of those favourite dreams and thoughts which had been her world in the lonely days before she knew Mrs. Ashleigh. And Norman liked to gaze on her earnest face and her expressive eyes, as her enthusiastic nature was stirred by any new beauty he pointed out or that she discovered in the scenery during their

rambles. She was so unaffected, and so child-like yet in many ways, that the young man, who had seen much of the world and its inhabitants, felt a kind of rest and a wholly new pleasure in the friendship of the little girl who had crossed his path. And she was never forward or obtrusive, for her old dread of intruding upon Norman and his mother was in her still, and on days when he did not seek her or notice her as usual, Violet, fully as proud as himself, kept out of his way, and when not with "dear grandmamma," to whom she became dearer every day, she went down to Mrs. Arnott's pretty cottage, or took her accustomed solitary rambles, for it was nothing new to Violet to be left to her own resources. But as the days went on, this was seldom the case, for the more Violet avoided him, the more Norman seemed to take pleasure in her society. In a few weeks he began to call her "Violet." It seemed to come naturally; she was so young and so much now one of the family. It gave Mrs. Ashleigh much happiness to see that her son,—haughty, somewhat exclusive Norman,—felt no regret at the addition to their household, but was so soon quite at home with the young orphan she had

taken to her heart. And good Mrs. Brownson would often say to herself,—

“ How Mr. Norman does take to that young thing ! But it is no wonder ; she is a sweet young creature. To see him with her makes one think how it would have been if he had had a sister. It was a happy day that brought her here, for what my mistress would do without her now I cannot tell, and I’m sure she has done Mr. Norman good. I don’t think he has looked half so serious since he has been at home this time as he used to do.”

In the evenings now when the days were shortening, they would all three remain indoors, generally sitting in Mrs. Ashleigh’s room, and Norman would often read aloud to his mother and Violet. He had a rich, melodious voice, which rendered his reading very agreeable to listen to, and to Violet’s fancy the beauty of his pale, intellectual face always seemed enhanced when he became absorbed in what he read. And Violet never lost any of her first delight in hearing Norman play, and some of her happiest hours were passed in this enjoyment. She was never too shy to sing for him now, and he shared his mother’s admiration of her sweet young

voice, and very often accompanied her himself on the piano.

Often too they would all three go down to Mrs. Arnott's cottage and spend the evening with her; indeed, she was almost like one of the family, her husband having been one of the few who were on terms of intimate friendship with Norman Ashleigh. And as they walked home at nights along the lonesome, moonlit road, with the dark hills rising on one side, Violet would feel at times almost awestruck at the scene, new as it still was to her, but she could never be afraid when Norman was with them. She was too young to think of defining her feelings towards him, or to wonder why she always felt so perfectly happy in his company. She only knew that he commanded her entire trust and confidence, and that she prized his friendship, so kindly given, very, very much. In her letters to Mrs. Mortimer and Eleanor, Violet would write of Norman freely and naturally as she did of his mother; but Eleanor's heart burned with envy at the mention of every fresh kindness received from him, and as the days passed on and no fresh overtures came from Mrs. Ashleigh, Mrs. Mortimer began to fear

that she intended holding entirely aloof from them, and she almost regretted having parted with Violet without a struggle, and thus having practically lost control over the young girl and her large fortune.

"Mamma," said Eleanor to her one day on which they had heard from Violet, "if I ever become acquainted with Norman Ashleigh, I know I shall hate him."

As she said this, more to herself than to her mother, Eleanor's handsome face was not pleasant to look on, with the cold light in those still blue eyes and the haughty determination about the mouth, unusual in one so young.

"Nonsense, my dear; I don't see why you should, though certainly he is foolish to waste so much of his time on a child, for whom he can care nothing, like Violet. But he will soon grow tired of her; there is not much company near Ashleigh Court, and he is glad of any new face for a change, no doubt."

Eleanor smiled contemptuously. She knew her mother built great hopes on what would be the result if she and Norman Ashleigh were to become acquainted. And so the mother and daughter continued to mingle in scenes of

gaiety and fashion, where Eleanor attracted by her beauty, but often repelled by her cold, haughty demeanour, in little fear of losing her own heart to any of her admirers, for with her prudence and discernment she was not easily to be caught. Eleanor Gordon meant to marry for a rich home, a good name, and an establishment, all of which she doubted not her beauty would one day secure for her. And if her heart should happen to be given to the possessor of all these, well and good; if not, it mattered nothing to her. She was not troubled with much romance in her nature, and her education had not been such as to teach her that mutual love was necessary to render marriage happy.

CHAPTER VII.

NORMAN ASHLEIGH had been at home two months ; five months had elapsed since Violet's arrival at Ashleigh Court, and it was growing time for her long, pleasant holiday to come to an end, time for her to think of study and lessons again. Not pleasant, desultory study, such as she indulged in now on her favourite subjects, and with which she whiled away many an hour in the library, but real hard work, such as had been interrupted during these few happy months. Mrs. Ashleigh knew that it was best to begin again now when winter was coming, because in any case Violet would necessarily be kept much indoors, and so would not feel the change so keenly. The young girl had become as a daughter to Mrs. Ashleigh, who knew how she would miss her during the hours she must devote to study ; but it must be so, and Mrs. Ashleigh began to look out for a governess and to engage masters for Violet. She had taken her son's

advice on the subject, and she thought, if she guessed aright, that he seemed as sorry as herself that Violet's holiday was over.

"It would not be orthodox, I suppose, mother, for you to allow her education to be considered as completed, for a year or more yet? And yet she has information of which many a woman twice her age cannot boast."

"Poor Violet! she was kept very hard at work before she came here. She is nearly sixteen now, Norman, and in a year's time a governess may be dispensed with."

One day, before anything was finally settled, as Mrs. Ashleigh and Violet were sitting together, the former said smilingly,—

"How nice it would be, my love, if knowledge could be acquired without settling down to study with a governess and all these teachers, would it not, Violet?"

"Grandmamma," said Violet after a pause, quickly, as if wishing to get it said, "would it be better for me to go to school?"

For some days Violet had been pondering in her own mind whether Mrs. Ashleigh and Norman might not find it unpleasant to have a governess residing in the house, and which

would be inevitable on account of their distance from town. This, with the necessity of having masters coming to the house, would be all obviated if she were to go to school, and she began to think that Mrs. Ashleigh perhaps considered it to be the best plan, but would not mention it for fear of causing her grief; besides, Violet knew that her dear protectress would be sorry to part with her. It did not take long for a sensitive girl like Violet to conjure up these ideas and to resolve to broach the subject herself. It cost her a very painful effort, though Mrs. Ashleigh's last words spoken so unconsciously helped her on. What if it should really come to pass that she had to leave Ashleigh Court and go to school! The idea brought a strange sinking of her heart as she waited for Mrs. Ashleigh's answer to her suggestion. She did not know that Norman had entered the room, the door of which stood open, and had heard her question. Her back was turned towards him, and she started at his voice as he came forward before Mrs. Ashleigh could reply.

“Violet! what put such a notion into your head? Are you not happy here, that you wish to leave my mother and go to school?”

He spoke quickly and with pain in his tone, and Violet, looking up, saw that he was very serious. Her eyes filled with tears as she said to him,—

“I don’t wish to leave her, Mr. Ashleigh. You know I am very happy here, and I should not like to go away, but, I thought—” and Violet stopped.

Mrs. Ashleigh drew her towards her, saying very tenderly,—

“My love, I think I can guess what you would say, and I am going to make you promise not to think of it again. Why, Violet, do you think I brought you home here to part with you so soon? And as to the idea you have been making yourself unhappy with, don’t you know I would spend six months in trying to find a suitable governess sooner than send you away. So now,” she added merrily, “never name school again in my hearing.”

Violet thanked Mrs. Ashleigh with a very loving glance.

“Two against one, you see, Violet. You were very soon vanquished,” said Norman, smiling.

Something in his look of pleasure made

Violet think that perhaps he was glad, however little, that she was not going away. She had known that Mrs. Ashleigh would be sorry to part with her, but that Norman could care anything about the matter, she had not ventured to think, and now the idea that he did made her feel strangely happy, though she scarcely knew why.

"And I can't help feeling glad that I was overcome, Mr. Ashleigh," she said, laughing.

"Violet, don't call me 'Mr. Ashleigh' any more."

Somewhat confused, Violet looked at Mrs. Ashleigh, who smiled very kindly,—

"You are one of us now, you know, my love. He calls you 'Violet'; call him 'Norman.'"

She saw they wished it, so she said playfully, though a little timidly, "Well, then, Norman, I will;" and it was very pleasant to Norman to hear her address him thus familiarly for the first time.

"Thank you, Violet," he said. "And now I have to ask you to forgive me for supposing it to be because you were not happy here that you thought of leaving us, will you?"

"I will, if you will promise never to think

so again," she answered, laughing happily. And so the matter was settled.

Shortly afterwards a governess was found for Violet in the person of a Miss Lyndsay, an amiable and talented lady, who had been a friend of Mrs. Arnott's before her marriage, and had been compelled by family reverses to earn her own bread. Now that Violet was fairly to begin her lessons again Mrs. Ashleigh set apart for her use as a school-room a small, pleasant room in front of the house, and here, after Miss Lyndsay's arrival, Violet spent the greater part of her mornings. She liked her governess from the first, and soon found she was one of whom she could make a friend, and she devoted herself with ardour to her studies under her tuition. Miss Lyndsay was a perfect lady, having been reared in delicacy and refinement, and was possessed of every accomplishment; but during the four or five years during which she had been employed as a governess she had never been in any family where she was treated with such consideration and so much as an equal as at Ashleigh Court. After a time she began to spend most part of the evening with Mrs. Ashleigh and her son and Violet.

It was a great pleasure to Mrs. Arnott to have a friend of her girlhood so near her, and very often Miss Lyndsay and Violet would go together to see her when study hours were over. Necessarily, Norman had much less now of Violet's society. When not engaged with her studies she often walked out with Miss Lyndsay, and most of her spare time she gave of course to Mrs. Ashleigh.

None knew how Violet began to miss the long, pleasant rambles with Norman, during which she had grown to love hearing him talk to her, and had learnt to be so proud of his friendship. It may have been that he himself missed his girlish companion from his side, during his walks, for they became less frequent, and when merely taking a stroll or not accompanying his mother, Norman rarely went further than his own grounds. He remained more in the library or his own room, reading or writing, during the hours in which he and Violet had been accustomed to go out together. Whenever he went into town, Norman nearly always rode, and more than once Violet looked after him with longing eyes, wishing she too might mount on horseback, for she had never enjoyed that exercise since

her father's death. More than once, too, Norman had wished she could do so under his protection ; but Mrs. Ashleigh dared not trust her on any horse they possessed, so he had to forego his wish. The room in which Violet usually took her music lessons and practised was near the library, and several times when Norman was reading and heard her engaged on some piece in which she seemed to find difficulty, he would leave his book and go in to her, as if by accident, and show her how to master her difficulty ; and somehow Violet found her practising very easy when Norman was with her, and she seemed to learn better from him than from the master who taught her.

The month of February arrived, and in due course came the day which was Violet's sixteenth birthday. She was to have a holiday, and rejoiced to find the morning fine when she awoke. At breakfast she received the warm congratulations of Mrs. Ashleigh, Norman, and Miss Lyndsay, and Mrs. Ashleigh gave her a beautiful little watch, which delighted her. She kissed her dear guardian so heartily as she thanked her for her present, and the soft eyes beamed with such a loving expression that

Mrs. Ashleigh looked at her with fresh tenderness and admiration. Norman, too, regarded her attentively, but said nothing until the meal was over. Then he rose and said smiling,—

“I am afraid, Violet, you will think me rather behindhand with my present, but unfortunately I cannot bring it to you. You will have to let me take you to it.”

Violet looked curiously at Norman, and at Mrs. Ashleigh, who laughed kindly and bade her go with Norman. She went with him from the room, and he led the way to the hall door, which stood open, and looking out, Violet saw one of the grooms holding a most beautiful chestnut pony saddled and bridled. She uttered an exclamation and stood still, scarcely knowing whether to go towards it or not. Norman smiled at her embarrassment.

“Don’t you like him, Violet? He is yours, if you will have him.”

Violet’s eyes were raised to Norman’s face.

“Norman! is that lovely pony really for me? You have really given him to me?”

“Certainly I have; don’t you like my present?”

But Violet did not answer at once; she went out and stood by the pony, caressing

him, and the beautiful creature did not seem averse to feel her soft little hand on his neck. The groom had gone, and Norman came and stood by Violet's side as she stroked and patted the pony. All at once she seemed to recollect herself, and as she looked up, Norman saw the tears in her eyes.

"Oh, Norman ! I have never thanked you, and you have given me what I was always longing for and never dreamt of really having ! You know what I would like to say, Norman, but I can only thank you very, very much ; " and she held out her hand to him, which he took, saying very kindly,—

"Never mind thanking me, Violet ; promise me instead to take your first ride with me to-day. My mother will let you go now without being afraid."

"Oh, how delicious ! indeed I will promise ! thank you, Norman ; " then in a lower tone, she said, "Do you know, it made me think so of papa, because I have never ridden since he died. And the poor little pony I had then ! I wonder if he is alive yet ! He was called Charley ; Norman, shall I call this one after him ? He is handsomer than my first dear little Charley, though."

Norman laughed. "Then we shall be reversing English history, Violet, for I believe the second Charles was not so handsome as the first by any means, was he? However, it cannot be helped, for 'Charley' this little individual is to be called; isn't it settled?"

"Well, I should like it to be," said Violet. "Norman, have grandmamma and Miss Lyndsay seen him yet?"

"I fancy they have had a private view of him before now," he replied, smiling.

"Oh, but I must bring them to look at him again," she said, with a very earnest glance. "I *wish* you knew how I want to thank you, Norman. How I shall love him! dear old fellow!" and she patted the animal playfully on the neck.

"Don't thank me too much, Violet, for you do not know whether I may not have a selfish motive in giving him to you. Perhaps I am getting tired of riding alone, and as, for some time at least, you must not ride Charley unless under my protection, I shall have company, you see. You have given me very little of your society since Miss Lyndsay came, you know, Miss Violet."

"Well, you voted for my having a governess, you know," said Violet mischievously, as she turned away, partly to go for her governess and Mrs. Ashleigh, but partly also that Norman might not see her face as she thought of what he had just said. Did he then care so much for her society? For though he had spoken playfully, Violet knew by the look in his deep grey eyes that Norman was in earnest, and the thought caused the rosy colour to mount to her pale, olive cheek, for did she not value Norman Ashleigh's friendship very, very much? and was it not very sweet to know that he, so proud, so gifted, to whom she must appear little more than a child, prized hers in return? That day was a very happy one for Violet, when, mounted on her beautiful pony, she rode by Norman's side for the first time. Norman had bought and chosen the pony himself, and Mrs. Ashleigh felt no fears for Violet now, as with a pleased smile she watched her and Norman ride away together. Violet looked very well in the pretty riding costume which Mrs. Ashleigh had prepared for her. It was evident that Norman thought so as he looked at her. She sat as easily and gracefully as though she

had ridden but yesterday, although six years had elapsed since she had last done so.

"Oh, it is delightful, Norman, the feeling of being on horseback again! I am not the least afraid, so don't take too much trouble looking after me;" and she laughed merrily as she called out to Mrs. Ashleigh, "You are not afraid to trust me now, are you, grand-mamma?"

"No, my darling, not on that pony, and with Norman."

How Violet enjoyed the air that bright, frosty February morning as they galloped through the lanes under the shadow of the hills! After some time they went at walking pace to rest the horses, and Violet appeared absorbed in thought. Then she said suddenly,—

"Norman, how did you know I should like so much to ride, and that it would please me so to have a pony? I have never said much about it that I remember;" and she looked eagerly at Norman for an answer.

"No, Violet, but you have thought about it; do you think I could not tell that by your face when I have expressed a wish to my mother in your presence that we had a horse on which she could trust you? And you have

forgotten that the day on which we first made acquaintance you told me how you used to ride long ago, and why you had to give up your pony. You did not tell me, little Violet, what it cost you to give it up, but did you think I could not guess? Well, I could not give you back your identical pony, but there was nothing easier than to give you this one, in hopes it would afford you pleasure, and I think it has done so."

Norman spoke so earnestly, almost passionately, as though he meant more than the mere words conveyed, that Violet was startled; she had not expected so earnest an answer to her half-playful question.

"You are very, very kind!" was all she could say now. How well he had guessed her thoughts and wishes, how well he had even remembered what she had said to him at their first meeting, though he had seemed not to notice it at the time!

And Violet was so silent and abstracted for a few minutes that Norman tried to rouse her by talking gaily on indifferent subjects, and soon succeeded in making her banish her thoughts and laugh and talk to him as usual.

Very often now on fine days, when not

engaged with her lessons, Violet rode out under Norman's protection, and Miss Lyndsay found herself solitary in her walks. A new life seemed to have begun for Violet since her sixteenth birthday, a life exquisitely happy, which made her wake every morning with a feeling of indescribable joy, and sometimes to lie awake at nights, wondering at her happiness, and thinking of her past loneliness in London as a sorrowful dream never to trouble her more. But it was no wonder she was happy, she told herself; feeling Mrs. Ashleigh, Norman, and everyone so kind to her, and loving Ashleigh Court as she did, with its beautiful gardens and the mountains and sea so near. She laughed to herself sometimes when she thought of how she had dreaded Norman's return home, for had not she and dear grandmamma been happier than ever since he came? and was it not a beautiful thing to see the love subsisting between himself and his mother? Once or twice a sudden fear broke in upon Violet's happiness, a fear that something might occur to interrupt this untroubled joyous life, that it could not go on always like this. And on these occasions it was somehow always of Norman she thought—that

it might be something connected with him that would come to spoil her bliss—that he would have to go away, or he might marry, as Brownson had more than once told Violet was very desirable. And as she thought of this last contingency a strange coldness would creep over Violet's heart, for if Norman married, there would be an end of their familiar friendship, their pleasant intercourse. And afterwards Violet would reproach herself that it was not of Mrs. Ashleigh she had thought, that no fear concerning her had crossed her mind, and yet might not she be the one she would lose, dear grandmamma, of whose sweet, unalterable affection she felt so certain, it which only death could take from her? But these gloomy thoughts did not trouble her often, for Violet was very young, light-hearted, and full of hope. Her life looked long and bright before her, and kindness was all around her now. Sometimes as she and Norman rode out together the old house-keeper would watch them from some window, and on one occasion her thoughts ran as follows,—

“Eh, dear! but they look well together, those two! She has been just like a happy

bird lately, has Miss Violet, and my proud young master takes to her so, he that for such a time has never seemed to care for any lady but his mother, though I'm sure he has plenty of opportunity. What if he—eh, no, but I'm forgetting; she is too young, far too young. It struck me, looking at them together; but of course she is too young ; ” and Brownson banished her idea, whatever it was.

And Violet's happy, quiet life went on, for quiet it was, living there at Ashleigh Court, at a distance from the town, which she seldom visited. She was too young yet to be included in the invitations which were sent to Mrs. Ashleigh and Norman, and when they two or three times had company at Ashleigh Court, Violet, though she enjoyed it as she did everything—for everything wore the charm of novelty and was delightful to her, in her young happiness—still felt it was the every-day existence that she loved and that formed the joy of her life. Though she knew it not, though she thought not of it, this girl, young as she was, was verging on a discovery which she was yet prevented making by the quiet depth of uninterrupted happiness in which her days flowed on.

CHAPTER VIII.

ONE day early in April Violet came out of the house to go down to the seashore, carrying two or three books with her, as she intended to study a lesson for the next day, sitting in her favourite nook among the cliffs. It was one of those sweet, balmy days which make one feel that spring has really come, and when nature looks so fresh and bright that one cannot but yield to its influence and be joyous too.

It was almost the first day that Violet had been able to sit in the open air since the previous summer, and she hailed it with enthusiastic delight. She and Norman were going to spend that evening with Mrs. Arnott, who had asked them to meet two or three friends, and Violet intended to study her next day's lesson for one of her masters now, as she would not be at home to do so at her usual study hour. In the garden she met Norman, and

told him her intention. He smiled as he said,—

“ You are going to study on the seashore? If I were you, Violet, I would stay in the house to do it, or here in the garden, if you *will* be out.”

“ Norman, why? ” but before he could answer she went on, “ Oh, no, I must go; it is so long since I sat on the shore, and it is such a lovely day. At half-past four I shall have to come in to dress,” and she left him, singing gaily to herself.

Norman looked after her very earnestly, with a peculiar smile upon his lips.

On reaching her destination, Violet sat down and began to study, though after a few minutes she found it hard to keep her attention fixed on her books. Every time she looked up her gaze became riveted on the sea, and the fascination of watching the waves as she sat there in her nook among the cliffs for the first time after the long winter was irresistible. At last she forgot herself altogether; the books slipped unnoticed from her knee, and with her chin resting on her hands she sat leaning forwards and was soon lost in her own thoughts, insensible to everything but the scene before her.

It may have been a bad habit, but it was a very pleasant one while it lasted, that of becoming utterly lost in her own happy thoughts. The soft, gentle air and the delicious monotony of the waves lulled her into a kind of waking doze, from which after about an hour she was aroused by approaching footsteps and hearing Norman's voice,—

“Violet, it is half-past four.”

She looked up at once, and saw him gazing down at her with an amused smile in his grey eyes.

She was fully aroused now, and hardly knew where to look, in her vexation at herself. She stood up, and turning her blushing, disturbed countenance away from Norman, said,—

“It is no use; I shall never try to study here again. I cannot.”

“I could have told you that an hour ago, Violet,” said Norman, smiling still.

“Is that what you meant, when you advised me not to come? Why did you not tell me?” asked Violet, forgetting she had not given him time to do so.

“Supposing I had done so, I am afraid it would not have prevented your coming

to try for yourself. Am I not right?" asked Norman, laughingly. "But I knew that, sitting alone here with the sea before you to study, you would never study anything else."

"Especially German," said Violet ruefully. "I don't know a line of it, and Mr. Heinbach comes to-morrow at ten o'clock. You will have to go to Mrs. Arnott's without me, Norman; I can't go, of course. We promised to be there very early, and I have not time to dress and study my German too."

"You will have time in the morning, won't you?" and Norman took up the books from the ground to carry them home for her.

"No; I have my lessons to do for Miss Lyndsay then. I shall have to stay at home this evening, of course; it does not matter," said Violet, trying to look unconcerned as they turned towards Ashleigh Court.

"Shall I try my powers of persuasion on Miss Lyndsay to see whether she will let you off to-morrow morning and give you time to study this unfortunate German?"

"Oh, no, don't, thank you, Norman; I

would rather you did not, for I have had a holiday two or three mornings lately, you know, to go out riding. It is my own fault, of course, and I must stay at home."

"And what shall I say to Mrs. Arnott, Violet?"

"Oh, you can tell her the real reason. Oh, dear! I wish now it had not been such a lovely day," sighed Violet, forgetting her attempted unconcern.

Norman said no more just then; but on reaching the house he went straight to seek Miss Lyndsay, whom he found sitting with his mother, and made his request on behalf of Violet.

"My poor Violet!" exclaimed Mrs. Ashleigh, smiling, attempting to learn a German lesson, sitting by the sea, on a day like this!"

"A less enthusiastic person could do so, and Violet must have thought she could do the same," said Miss Lyndsay. "I suppose I must not refuse you, Mr. Ashleigh?"

"I know that Mrs. Arnott wishes Violet very much to go there this evening, and early too, or else, Norman, don't you think it is too bad to come so often with these requests to Miss Lyndsay?"

"I am afraid Violet's lessons would get on badly if they were left to your direction, Mr. Ashleigh," said Miss Lyndsay, laughing; "but she had better go and dress at once now."

"Thank you, Miss Lyndsay. I promise not to beg another favour for a long time," laughed Norman as he left the room and went to Violet in the schoolroom.

"Put away that obnoxious German, Violet. I have orders for you to go and dress as quickly as you can, to come to Mrs. Arnott's."

"Oh, Norman! have you been to Miss Lyndsay, after all? What did she say?"

"Well, she granted my request and was seconded by my mother. Are you satisfied?"

"Of course; but you should not have done it. Why are you so kind to me?" she added earnestly and quickly, as she raised her beautiful eyes to his face. He looked at her for a moment and seemed about to reply, but Violet turned away and left the room.

And so they went together to Mrs. Arnott's that evening. The day might come when they would both wish that Norman had gone alone; but now none but bright thoughts were theirs as they set out from Ashleigh Court together.

Among the friends Mrs. Arnott had invited

were an elderly lady and gentleman, who had been great friends of her husband's, and who lived at about two miles' distance, nearer the town. They had brought with them to-night a Mr. Louis Wilmot, a second cousin of the lady's, who happened to be on a visit to them at the time. He looked about thirty years of age, and Mrs. Arnott told Norman that all she yet knew of him was that he had lived many years abroad, and she believed he was possessed of a small fortune, as he was not engaged in any business or profession. His cousin had lost sight of him during several years, until he had returned to England shortly before the present time. Mr. Wilmot had a great deal of the Frenchman about him, both in appearance and manners, and he evidently seemed bent on making himself agreeable. He was about the middle height and very handsome, with dark, melancholy eyes, which were spoiled by their restless, uneasy expression, that never allowed them to look straight or full at the person he addressed. He had thin lips and very white teeth, and his face looked somewhat worn and haggard, so as to give him a dissipated air. He was most elaborately dressed, and his

manners had the perfect ease of a gentleman, in spite of those shifting eyes of his, which never looked long steadily at anyone.

From the first moment of introduction Norman Ashleigh could not bring himself to like Mr. Wilmot. Something in that gentleman's fascinating smile even seemed to fill him with distrust. At first Mr. Wilmot devoted himself with careless politeness to Violet, only because young ladies were scarce in the room ; but after he had been for some minutes in conversation with his cousin's husband he again went and sat down by her and began to talk to her very earnestly, showing her marked attention.

Violet let him talk on, conscious of his being very handsome and agreeable, but in no other way thinking particularly about him, except how very unlike Norman he was. And Norman sat looking at them, feeling almost as though he would like to annihilate Mr. Wilmot as he continued exercising his fascinations on Violet, and still knowing that if that gentleman chose to be polite to her, he, Norman, had not the slightest right to prevent it.

“ Cannot he see how young she is ? ” said Norman to himself in his indignation.

When at last Violet looked across at Norman she saw his gaze fixed upon Mr. Wilmot with that stern expression that made the likeness to Rupert Ashleigh's portrait so strong.

"What is the matter with Norman?" she thought; "he cannot like Mr. Wilmot, or he would not look like that. But they have scarcely spoken to each other," and Violet became abstracted, and answered Mr. Wilmot absently. It was her own happiness which disposed her to be pleased with everyone, and had made Mr. Wilmot appear so agreeable; but now that something seemed amiss with Norman she began to perceive that there was something in the countenance of her new acquaintance which did not please her, though she could not tell exactly what it was.

"How unlike he is to Norman!" was her ever-recurring thought.

When the evening was over, Mr. Wilmot still kept up his marked attention to Violet, and was offering his arm to lead her to the carriage, when Norman interfered, and said in a tone that admitted of no dispute,—

"Pardon me, I will escort Miss Mortimer."

Then giving his arm to Violet, he led her away, having first bowed haughtily and

coldly to Mr. Wilmot, who darted at him a fierce look of his restless eyes for his interference. In that moment, when Louis Wilmot met the steady gaze of Norman Ashleigh's piercing grey eyes, a close observer might have foretold that no cordiality was destined to exist between these two young men.

"Violet," asked Norman rather suddenly, when they were seated in the carriage, "what do you think of Mr. Wilmot?"

"Well, I think he is very handsome and very polite, don't you?" said Violet, rather mischievously, thinking to make Norman tell her what he thought of him himself.

"Violet, do you like him?" he asked, forgetting he had scarcely a right to expect her to answer.

It was a dark night, and Violet could hardly see Norman's face; but the almost painful eagerness of his tone startled her into seriousness, and she replied slowly,—

"I don't think I do, Norman, but I can't tell you why."

He appeared satisfied, and said no more on the subject. There was an impression on Norman's mind that Louis Wilmot was not a good man, and knowing so little about him,

he determined to treat him coldly and with only distant politeness, however long he might remain in the neighbourhood and on whatever occasions they might meet in future.

And as he thought of him, a wish came over his mind that he had let Violet have her own way and stay at home to study that evening.

Miss Lyndsay met them in the hall when they reached home.

“Mrs. Ashleigh wishes to see you in the library,” she said to Norman.

“Is my mother ill?” he asked quickly.

“Oh, no, Mr. Ashleigh,” she replied, and he left them at once.

“Miss Lyndsay, is anything the matter?” asked Violet, fearing she knew not what.

“Mrs. Ashleigh has received bad news, Violet. A letter came this evening, telling her that her sister-in-law in India has lost her husband and is herself in very bad health. Mrs. Ashleigh has not told me any more; but she is in trouble about it, and seemed very anxious for Mr. Ashleigh to come home. They are sure to be some time together, so you had better go up to bed now, dear. Mrs. Ashleigh would not like you to wait up.”

Violet knew she was right, and though she

would have liked very much to see Mrs. Ashleigh to-night, she said good-night to Miss Lyndsay, and went up at once to her own room.

Of course Violet had very often heard Mrs. Ashleigh and Norman speak of Mr. and Mrs. Lacy, their relatives in India. Mrs. Lacy was the youngest and the only surviving sister of Norman's father, who, as Mrs. Ashleigh had often told Violet, had regarded her with intense affection, though she was eighteen or nineteen years younger than himself.

Norman had been a great favourite with his aunt when a boy, and ever since she and her husband had left England for India they had kept up a close correspondence with Ashleigh Court. Violet had more than once read portions of their letters, and she felt sorrow and concern for the sake of Mrs. Ashleigh and Norman, knowing it must be a blow to them to hear of Mr. Lacy's death and his widow's ill health. This was the saddest night Violet had experienced since her arrival at Ashleigh Court, for the evening at Mrs. Arnott's had not been so pleasant as usual, owing to the dislike Norman had taken to Mr. Wilmot and the not very agreeable impression that gentle-

man had made on herself. She began to wish devoutly now that they had never met him, for it was easy to see that he and Norman could never be on terms of cordiality.

When Norman had gone into the library he had found Mrs. Ashleigh leaning her head on her hand and looking pale and sorrowful and in deep thought. When he entered, she took up a letter from the table, and silently put it into his hand, looking up earnestly into his face as he read it. It was from his aunt, Mrs. Lacy herself, and was written in a trembling hand in her first anguish of grief for her husband's death. He had been taken from her after three days' illness, and she had been so prostrate since that it was only now after the funeral that she was able to write the sad news. She herself had never been strong, and now in her desolation she was told by the doctors that consumption threatened her. She was terribly alone, she said, for she and her husband had always lived very quietly and retired on their estate which he had purchased near Calcutta. She was almost entirely without friends, and her husband had always been so strong until struck down by fever that it had been her

own death of which she had always thought more than of his. It was her first and earnest desire to return to England, she said, to Ashleigh Court, but she was prevented by her doctors, who told her that a winter in England would be her death, and even if she ever recovered sufficiently to risk it, she must not travel alone, and, with the exception of one or two faithful English servants, she had no one who could accompany her. "You will know how I must long to be with you now," she wrote, "but I feel I shall never see England again."

And in the midst of her trouble she had just heard that some relatives of Mr. Lacy's who had come out to India a few years previously, but with whom they had never been on friendly terms, intended to dispute her right to a considerable portion of the money he had left her. In her grief and ill health and difficulties she had no one to lean upon or to help her, and though she made no direct request for someone to come to her, there lay a mute appeal in every word of her distressing letter. Norman was very pale, as he looked up from it and met his mother's eyes fixed upon his face. He sat

down by her, and after a pause he said with pain but still very firmly,—

“Mother, I must go to her.”

Mrs. Ashleigh’s voice was very low as she answered,—

“I knew you would say so, Norman. Yes, it is right for you to go; your father would have wished it. Poor Mary.”

“I must be prepared to stay some time if necessary, mother. It is easier for me to leave you now than if you had not Violet.

“I must let you go, Norman, for I am strong, thank God, though I am so much older than Mary. I have a happy home, and, as you say, I have Violet, while poor Mary is desolate and without friends in her weak health and difficulties. Norman, who would have thought it, your uncle Lacy, who was so strong and healthy!”

Then Mrs. Ashleigh mentioned that Mrs. Lacy’s letter had been through carelessness omitted to be given to their messenger who went that morning as usual to the post-office, and on the omission being discovered, it had been sent on specially this evening, as Mrs. Ashleigh was known always to be anxious about the arrival of her letters

from India. And as Norman heard this, in the midst of his sorrow for his uncle's death and his aunt's desolation, there arose the thought that if the letter had arrived that morning, as it ought to have done, he and Violet would not have gone to Mrs. Arnott's, and so might never have made the acquaintance of Mr. Louis Wilmot. On how slight a thing does the course of our lives depend! There was a feeling in Norman's heart that he could have gone away to India more easily, with less anxiety, if he had not known of the existence of Mr. Wilmot, at least if he had not known him as one likely to remain for some time in the neighbourhood of Ashleigh Court.

The mother and son sat very long together that night. The shadow of approaching separation was over them, and it was only natural that the mother's heart yearned with a feverish regret that her son had to leave her. But she had known it must be so from the first moment of reading Mrs. Lacy's letter, and she would not grudge Norman to his aunt, his father's favourite sister, in her hour of trial. To many this parting would not have seemed much—a few months' absence in India

might have appeared but little ; but all are not loved, and so unselfishly, as was Norman Ashleigh. He was the joy of his mother's life, doubly treasured because he had been given to her so late ; he had ever been her pride and consolation, and how did she know that she would ever see him again, when she parted from him this time ! She was no longer young ; she might die without his being near her ; but, more than all, she was thinking, " What if anything should befall him so far away ! "

Violet in her own room knew not all that was passing downstairs, or sleep would not have come to her so soon that night. In the morning she was down first in the breakfast room, and was sitting alone when Norman entered. He shook hands with her as usual.

" Norman," she said, gently, " I am very sorry. Miss Lyndsay told me last night about Mr. Lacy."

And as she looked up, Violet saw that Norman's pale face was strangely moved, and his eyes, so attractive always, were bent on her now with an almost tender expression.

" Violet, would you care, would you be

sorry if I were to go away, for some months, perhaps a year ? ”

“ But you are not going, really, Norman ? ” she asked, feeling as though she could not breathe freely until he had reassured her.

“ Yes, Violet, I am going away to India.”

“ Going away to India ! ” she said, echoing his words. “ Oh, Norman ! ” and the exclamation came with a kind of gasp. She was looking out blankly before her, feeling as though she had just been awaked out of a happy dream, and the happiness had gone with the dream. For a minute all she could think of was that Norman was going away, and of course for an indefinite time ; then came the thought of Mrs. Ashleigh, and of how hard would be the long separation between the mother and son ; and there rose in Violet’s mind, too, visions of perils and accidents that might befall Norman. Then he told her all about his aunt’s illness, and her other difficulties, and Violet could not wonder at his decision. But she could say nothing yet, she could only think, think of the happy time now coming to an end, and the first indistinct glimpse of some discovery seemed breaking in upon her as she stood

there with Norman's familiar voice sounding in her ears, with his face, whose beauty had so attracted her from the first, looking down upon her, knowing as she did that so soon he would be far away, his form no longer visible to her eyes. And he had asked her whether she would care, whether she would be sorry, knowing not the desolation that was creeping into her heart as she thought of it. And so much might happen in a year.

"A year is a long time, Norman," she said at last, sadly, but very quietly. "What will grandmamma do?"

He saw she was grieving at his approaching departure, that she was sorry, for she had not yet learnt to think of hiding her feelings from him ; but he could not know how much, or to what extent. Looking at her very earnestly, but with a sad smile, he said,—

"Let us hope the time will pass quickly, Violet; and that on my return I shall find you and my mother both well, and as glad to see me as I shall to be with you again. And," he added, "heaven grant that I may bring my aunt with me, restored to health. It would have been very hard for me to leave my mother now for so long if she had not

you. Violet, you will take care of her for me whilst I am away?"

"Yes, Norman, I will," and Violet's heart throbbed with secret pride at the trust reposed in her, as she gave him her little hand as if to ratify her promise.

CHAPTER IX.

ALL too quickly passed the days that intervened before Norman's departure for India. He had written to his aunt, telling her of his coming, and the letter would precede his arrival by a few days. Whatever may have been Norman's own feelings at this time, he kept them to himself, and strove to cheer his mother, that dear mother who could not conceal her sorrow at the prospect of the long separation from her idolized son. Perhaps it was well for her that Norman had often to be away great part of the day, making preparations and arrangements for his departure, for sometimes when they were together, as she gazed on the fine face and form of which she had always been so proud, the thought would come over her that her son might be leaving her for ever, or that he would only return perhaps to find her dead, and the unbidden tears would rise at the thought. It often needed all Norman's efforts

and Violet's loving devices to restore Mrs. Ashleigh's calmness, for she was oppressed with anxiety also on Mrs. Lacy's account. Something told her she would never see her again, that death was surely claiming her sister-in-law for his own; but it was some little consolation to know that all she could do she was doing for the sister her husband had loved so well, that she was sending Norman to her to aid her in her difficulties; if not to bring her home, to be with her in her last hours and lay her in the grave. Norman was more sanguine; he hoped that, her grief calmed and her other annoyances disposed of by his help, his aunt would recover and that he would bring her back with him to England and Ashleigh Court. But anyone observing Norman closely, seeing him as he was when alone, might have guessed that there was some other emotion that was troubling him, terribly at times. And a look would come over his face sometimes as if he were in some perplexity, some doubt. More than once Violet noticed it and wondered at it when he was talking to her very earnestly, almost tenderly, as he did now during these days previous to parting. He would seem about

to say something, and then all at once would check himself suddenly and leave her without explanation. And Violet herself? Ah, what a dreary weight seemed to have fallen on her heart! How hard it was to keep her attention fixed on her daily lessons, how much harder now than on the day so lately when she had been unable to study for looking at the sea and thinking of her happiness! Norman was going away! and she knew all could never be quite the same when he came back. There was no one like him in the world, and he was going away, and oh, how everything might change in a year! She would be grown up then, a young lady, and he would treat her as such, and the familiar friendship of the past happy days would be over. And yet how kindly, how longingly he spoke of his return, and how earnest he had been when he asked her to be everything to his mother for him during his absence. No, it was not in his nature to forget her entirely, and then there would come over her that half-awakened knowledge, that consciousness that seemed coming to her so quickly, but which she dared not think about.

Before Norman left he and Violet saw

Mr. Wilmot once again. They had heard from Mrs. Arnott that he was still in the neighbourhood, and she fancied he must be staying for an indefinite time. Norman and Violet had been taking a walk among the hills when someone came up behind them. It was Louis Wilmot, looking as handsome and languishing as ever. He shook hands with Violet and made a speech about his delight at meeting her again, accompanying it by a glance of his dark eyes, which caused Norman to look very stern and that perplexed frown to contract his forehead. He could not refuse his hand to Mr. Wilmot when the latter offered his ; but if distant, haughty politeness could have annihilated a man, Norman's must have had that effect. It was powerless, however, against Louis Wilmot, who continued walking by Violet's side, talking freely and evidently bent on making himself agreeable to her. He did not appear to cherish any malice against Norman for his behaviour on the evening they met at Mrs. Arnott's, but Norman fancied he detected a tone of triumph in his voice as he told him he had heard of his approaching departure for India, and as he wished him a safe arrival there. "For my-

self," he continued, speaking to Violet, "I am happy to say that my good cousins will not hear of my leaving them yet, and thus I am afforded an opportunity to remain some time in this charming neighbourhood, and to keep up my acquaintance with the very agreeable people I have met here." And he went on to speak in profuse praises of the surrounding scenery, saying how fully he appreciated it, of all which Norman believed not one word. He told himself he was unjust to Mr. Wilmot, that he judged him rashly, without waiting to know anything of him or his character. But do what he would, the instinctive dislike remained, and it was helped on by Mr. Wilmot's behaviour to Violet. What did he mean by it? Why was he so persistent in pursuing his acquaintance with her? She was hardly one with whom a man like Louis Wilmot would care to carry on a passing flirtation. She must seem little more than a child to him, who knew nothing of her. Could he really mean——? and Norman's suspicion brought that troubled look with intensity to his face. If he were only not leaving home just now, if he were not so powerless to prevent Mr. Wilmot from seeing Violet during

his absence, at least until they knew more of him ! It was useless to speak to Mrs. Ashleigh, thus giving her fresh anxiety, for he knew she would never invite any such stranger as Mr. Wilmot to the house during his absence. And as Louis Wilmot talked on, Violet was feeling very uncomfortable. She did not like him, and the knowledge that Norman positively disliked him made her hardly able to follow all he said and answer him, for she was wishing him away and that she and Norman were alone again. What could he care for talking to her, and the time was so precious now, so near the day of Norman's departure. When they reached Ashleigh Court, if Louis Wilmot had hopes of being invited to enter, he was disappointed, for bidding him a coldly polite adieu, Norman opened the gate for Violet and passed in with her, Mr. Wilmot being left to pursue his way alone. They walked on silently for a minute or two, and then, as they neared the house, Norman turned suddenly to Violet, and as he looked down into her face, said earnestly, but in a low voice as if with an effort.—

“ Violet, will you promise me something, promise me as if I were your brother ? ”

She looked surprised, and he went on,—

“ I may be wrong, but I should not ask you if I did not think it best and reasonable. Do not think me impertinent if I ask you to see as little of Mr. Wilmot as possible during his stay here. Violet, you know I do not mean at some future time, when we may know more of him, but whilst I am away, do not give him any reason to think you care for his society, for you have told me you do not, You are not offended with me ? ” and Norman’s accents pleaded more persuasively than his words.

“ Oh, Norman ! why should I be offended ? I *will* promise you what you ask,” she said, very seriously, then in a lighter tone she added, “ I don’t think you need be afraid, though ; why should he care to try and see me ? He met us by accident to-day, you know, and I suppose he felt obliged to talk then.”

“ Violet, I think differently. I believe he will manage to see you, if it is only by putting himself in your way and even in my mother’s. And we know so little of him yet,” he reiterated.

“ Why, Norman, you don’t expect him to

turn out a thief or something like that!" laughed Violet; "I don't suppose he is so very bad after all, though we don't like him ourselves."

"I hope it may be so," but Norman was very serious, and did not join in Violet's laughter. "Thank you for your promise, Violet."

Violet had spoken lightly and jestingly to ease Norman's fears, whatever they were; but though he did not know it, it cost her no small effort to do so, for she felt sadly depressed and sorrowful just then, and their meeting with Mr. Wilmot had not tended to cheer her. What was Norman afraid of? He must have had some good reason to induce him to ask her so openly to make that promise to him. And he had feared her being offended! As if she could dream of such a thing, when everything he did seemed to her the best and nearest to perfection that could be done! And that intense longing that he were not going away, that feeling of desolation and wonder as to what her life would be like when he was gone, came over Violet with overwhelming force, as it so often did during these last days.

CHAPTER X.

IT came to the last evening. Norman was leaving Ashleigh Court early in the morning, full two hours before the usual hour for rising. Mrs. Ashleigh would of course be up to breakfast with her son and intended going with him to the station ; but Violet must say good-bye to Norman to-night. How gladly would she have stayed up all night to put off that adieu until morning if possible, but it could not be. There was no reason that she should rise early in the morning to see Norman as there was that his mother should do so. If Violet had suggested it, Mrs. Ashleigh in her kindness and unconsciousness would have told her not to think of doing so. And so they sat together this last evening, and Norman played for them on his favourite piano, as he was wont to do. His mother sat close by him, looking wistfully at him as she listened to his beautiful, soul-stirring music, not knowing how long it might be

before she could hear it again. And Violet sat near too, very quietly, no one knowing that her heart felt like to burst with pain as the precious minutes flew by.

Mrs. Ashleigh knew that Violet liked Norman, that she was sorry for his departure, and would miss him very much; but the young girl kept all sign of her deeper grief carefully hidden from her dear protectress, and exerted herself to divert and comfort her in a manner that made Mrs. Ashleigh feel more than ever how precious she had become to her, and caused Norman to thank heaven a thousand times that his mother had taken Violet Mortimer to her care. But to-night it was very hard for the brave little heart to keep the tears back and to hide the emotion that seemed welling up cruelly every moment as they sat there to all appearance so much as usual, while she knew that to-night she must hear Norman's voice speaking to her for the last time for so many months, that he was really going, so very, very soon.

Miss Lyndsay went early to her room, saying she had letters to write, having first bidden Norman good-bye and expressed her best wishes for his safe return. Then Norman

asked Violet to sing, only just one song, he urged, and she could not refuse, though she was afraid to trust herself, with that choking sensation in her throat. She went to the piano and, with an effort clearing her voice, she began to sing one of Norman's favourite songs, one he had given to her. She went on bravely until she had got about half through, and then—why, then it was no use, the effort was too much, she could keep up no longer, and turning aside she buried her face in her hands and wept freely. She would have given whole worlds to have been able to restrain it ; she felt terribly ashamed ; but, to her relief, Mrs. Ashleigh did not seem surprised at what seemed to her not extraordinary in a sensitive, affectionate girl like Violet. Norman had been very kind to her, and they all had been very happy, so what wonder if Violet were sad ? And dear Mrs. Ashleigh kissed her and consoled her, saying they ought not to have asked her to sing. Norman did not speak, but his eyes were bent on Violet with an expression of sorrow and tenderness, and yet with something of gladness in his countenance, whatever were its cause. He would not notice Violet's emotion

while it lasted, knowing how hard she must have tried to restrain it; but when in a few minutes she was calm again, he went and sat down by her and talked to her just as usual to put her at her ease, and yet with something tender in his manner, as though he would thank her for her sorrow on his account.

And when at last the moment came to say "good-bye," when they could prolong the evening no more, Norman, as he stood by Violet's side, turned to Mrs. Ashleigh with a smile, but with emotion in his voice, which, proud as he was, he could not hide then, and said,—

"Mother, Violet has promised to take care of you for me while I am away, and you know how well she can do it. Mind, little Violet," he added, turning to her, "that when I come home you must look more pleased to see me than you did the first time we met. But we know each other better now, don't we," and as he took her hand for the final adieu, he looked at her with peculiar, almost trembling earnestness for a moment. His mother looked at him and saw instinctively what he wished to ask but could not.

"Violet, let him kiss you," she said, and

some thought to which she had been blind before seemed to strike her as she looked at them; "it is good-bye; you have been such good friends, and it may be long before—" and she stopped and turned aside.

Then, still holding Violet's trembling little hand, Norman stooped and for the first time kissed her forehead, earnestly and gravely, as a brother might have done.

"Thank you, Violet," he whispered. "Good-bye, and may God bless you!" he added very, very earnestly.

"Good-bye, Norman," and Violet looked up once more with the dawn of a new emotion in her blushing face. She could say no more, and in another minute she was gone.

Straight up to her own room she went, never pausing or looking aside until she reached it, and when safe there in its seclusion, she sat down by the bed and cried as she never remembered to have done since the day her father died, with this difference, that then she was a child, while now she seemed, within the last few days, to have become a woman. All the pent-up feelings that were partially restrained before Norman and Mrs. Ashleigh burst forth freely now. With Norman's kiss

lingering on her forehead, with his whispered "God bless you" still ringing in her ears, Violet knew she loved him, not with any child's fondness, not with only a sister's affection, but with all her passionate woman's heart and deep, loving nature. Young as she was, only sixteen, and little as she had seen of the world, Violet knew now that her life's great love had come to her thus early; whether for joy or sorrow, whether to meet with a return or not, it was there. Norman or she might die, and he would never know of her love, or, if they lived, he might not care or ask for it; but there it was in her heart, forming part of herself. The knowledge of it had only seemed to come to her when he who had formed all her happiness was leaving her; light had only dawned on her now because in the maze of her wonderful joy she had never paused to inquire from whence it came; only when the joy was going away from her had she begun to see it truly. And there was something bewildering to one so young in finding how greatly she loved, something which made the careless, independent happiness of a child seem to have vanished for ever, to be replaced by the woman's restless longing

for happiness which it depended upon another to bestow.

And as Violet wept for the long, dreary days that were to come, the thought came to her that it might be that Norman would one day love her, or even, but it could not surely be, loved her now ! And she thought of all his kindness, so constant, so unvarying, so tender even, at times ; and every look, every word of his came back to her ; every expression of his face, in its attractive beauty, she remembered now, and there was untold rapture in the retrospect. But could it be ? Was it likely that proud Norman Ashleigh, with his rare gifts, with his numerous advantages, would dream of loving her, a young girl of sixteen, little more than a child ? Did he not look on her rather with a friend's affection, as one whom he might regard as a young sister, wishing she had been really such ? And still that hope would not be stifled, that hope that she did not love in vain would rise in the yearning heart, and oh ! what an earnest prayer for Norman Ashleigh's safe return went up to heaven that night before sleep came at last to Violet's wearied eyelids.

When she awoke, she found that Norman

must have been gone more than an hour. She had dreaded waking in time to hear the carriage drive down the avenue, and having to lie there listening to the sound as it died away, knowing that each moment took him further away from her. She rose and dressed, and opening the window, leant out looking over the sea ; then her eyes falling on the rose bush growing up against the window, she passed her hands caressingly over the leaves.

“The roses will have bloomed and withered and be blooming again before Norman comes back,” and Violet sighed, wearily. But she thought of Mrs. Ashleigh, and beside the love she bore to her guardian for her own sake, there was a strange happiness in remembering that Norman had asked her to take his place, as it were, towards his mother during his absence. And her earnest resolve to keep her promise seemed to form a link between herself and Norman. Mrs. Ashleigh must be doubly dear to her now ! The time had come when she could in part repay those who had been so kind to her. And might not the long, dreary time and even the knowledge that her great, deep love might have to be for ever silent, unsought for and unasked—might

not even this be easier to bear when she was employed in love's own labour, cheering and sustaining Norman's mother, doing her best to make the days pass quickly for her until her son's return ?

And so Violet went downstairs, where Mrs. Ashleigh was waiting for her in the breakfast-room, and going up to her she put her arms round her and kissed her.

" Good morning, grandmamma," she said, then half-sitting, half-kneeling by her she took Mrs. Ashleigh's hand caressingly in her own and looked up smilingly into her face. Brave little Violet ! Very carefully did she hide the traces of last night's emotion ; but it may have been that the thought that had dawned on Mrs. Ashleigh the previous night for the first time was on her now, for as she looked tenderly on Violet's upturned face and met the gaze that lovingly sought her own, she whispered fondly and with almost a sigh, " My darling ! " And the tone and manner almost shook Violet's composure, for she turned aside and hid her face on Mrs. Ashleigh's shoulder. But it was but for a moment, and then she listened as Mrs. Ashleigh told her all the little details of Norman's departure, unim-

portant in themselves, but so interesting to Violet; and how precious were the last few words of farewell he had sent to her by his mother!

"I waited to see the train go," said Mrs. Ashleigh; "but I have been home nearly an hour. Violet, my love, I have only you now. We must try to make each other happy until Norman comes back to us."

CHAPTER XI.

WHEN Mrs. Mortimer and Eleanor Gordon heard from Violet of Norman's departure, and that he was likely to remain abroad some time, the news afforded them considerable satisfaction. Eleanor had long given up the hope, and her mother was beginning to do, of ever being invited to Ashleigh Court, or of making Norman Ashleigh's acquaintance. Mrs. Mortimer was terribly disappointed; but Eleanor, ever since she had perceived by Violet's letters how kind and attentive Norman was to her, had made up her mind that she did not care for his acquaintance, and, to her mother's annoyance, repeatedly declared that she should only hate him, if ever they chanced to meet. Her nature, stronger and prouder than her mother's, enabled her to dismiss him from her thoughts and turn to a more profitable quarter, instead of fretting and sighing after that which she felt it was useless to hope to obtain. But

still, jealousy of what might be Violet's good fortune rankled in her heart, and it was undoubtedly pleasant to hear that Norman Ashleigh was safely out of the way for the present, for if Eleanor dreaded one thing more than another, it was to see Violet married before herself.

"She has money," she thought, "but with my small fortune I have beauty, which she has not;" and Eleanor would gaze triumphantly at the majestic figure and beautiful, statuesque face reflected in her mirror.

Violet had only written in very brief terms of Norman's departure, and its cause. She had mentioned that Mrs. Ashleigh would of course miss her son very much; but something kept her from expressing any concern herself, even such as she might naturally be expected to feel as a friend. Could Eleanor Gordon have been told that Violet was in love she would most likely have laughed the idea to scorn, perhaps have said she was far too young for such a thing, as though love were a thing to come by order, or not before a certain age. But then Eleanor did not believe in love; it was a thing she was far too poor ever to indulge in herself, and a steadfast,

all devoted love like Violet's was something she would not even have understood.

The days passed on very slowly at Ashleigh Court now. Norman had gone by the overland route to India, and he wrote as often as possible to his mother, who never failed to give his letters to Violet to read. And there was always frequent mention of herself in them, in sending her messages, or in the words "you and Violet," which constantly occurred. And the sight of her name written so often in Norman's handwriting caused her heart to thrill with joyous emotion. But how strange it felt to her to be reading Norman's letter, as she sat in the garden or in any of the places where so lately he had sat by her side and talked to her, and now he was gone, and each day took him farther and farther away !

Miss Lyndsay might have been excused for thinking it rather well than otherwise that Norman had had to go away. There were no interruptions now to her studies, as had been before, when he used to petition for Violet to go with him for a ride, or a walk, or when he would come between her and her lessons, as he had done that evening they went to Mrs. Arnott's, the evening the news arrived of

Mr. Lacy's death. No excuse came now to take Violet from the schoolroom, and her governess could not but be pleased at the way in which she devoted herself to her studies, for being naturally clever, she progressed rapidly. Miss Lyndsay could not know the strongest reason why her pupil applied to her lessons more than she had ever done before; she could not know that it was because they kept her from thinking too much, that it was in order that she might not lose herself in the thoughts that came over her so often, and because the studies helped to pass the long, weary days.

No one knew how in these early days of Norman's absence Violet often lay awake at night, thinking of the past and wondering what the future would be, thinking of her love, not daring to think it was returned, or ever might be. And imaginations would crowd into her mind, almost over sensitive, of dangers that might beset Norman in the far-off country to which he had gone.

What if he should take the fever and die, like Mr. Lacy? The idea made Violet shudder and feel as if there would be nothing then for her but to die too.

It is very possible that Violet might have fallen ill at this time if she had not had her lessons to divert her mind from the one subject occupying it. And after a few days she grew interested in them, and found relief in them, as we have said before ; but at first it had seemed terribly hard and irksome to apply to anything in the soreness of her spirit. Poor Violet ! she had a harder lesson than any comprised in her education, to learn thus early, that of keeping buried in her heart the secret of her love and having to appear cheerful and happy outwardly, so that none might know when she felt doubt and care within.

The happiest hours of her life now were those spent alone with Mrs. Ashleigh. She never felt so peaceful and contented as when with her, and every moment that was not engaged in the schoolroom was spent in her society. There was something soothing in the thought that she was fulfilling her promise to Norman when cheering and diverting his mother. And Mrs. Ashleigh often wondered what she would have done in her loneliness if she had not had Violet to cheer her home and heart.

Violet was forcibly reminded now of the

days of her first coming to Ashleigh Court, bright, happy, careless days, when she and grandmamma were alone, and she had wanted no other company ; but those days were gone, never to return ; they were gone with the last remnant of her childhood, which seemed to have slipped away from her grasp and left her a woman, with a woman's heart and feeling at her girlish years.

Violet took the old accustomed solitary rambles very rarely now. She was almost invariably with Mrs. Ashleigh in her walks or when she drove to town ; but roaming alone among the hills seemed to have lost its charm for her. She had tried it once or twice, taking the dog Carlo with her ; but the loneliness of the hills was oppressive, though she had loved it so much in the old days before she knew Norman. Every path, every turn amongst them, and every nook in the valley reminded her, oh, how painfully ! of the times she had wandered there with him by her side, rejoicing and so happy, never thinking of the awakening that was to come so soon.

“ I may never wander about here again with Norman, perhaps,” she sighed as she turned

her steps homewards. Others might come between them in the future, and they would be little more than strangers. And so for the present Violet kept away from the dear, beautiful hills, and was content to view them from a distance. She rode Charley sometimes, attended by a steady groom, because it did her good, and Mrs. Ashleigh thought she enjoyed it. How she recalled, every time she mounted the pony, the happy day Norman had given him to her. He had left her many injunctions to take care of herself when riding. "Not that I mistrust Charley," he had said, smiling; "but he might feel inclined to take liberties, as I shall not be there to keep him in order."

One place Violet did not forsake, one place where she always felt less sad and oppressed than anywhere else, and that was the sea-shore. She did not know how it was, but here, by the side of the changeless and yet ever changing sea, painful thoughts did not so overpower her. It seemed so familiar, like an old friend that she had known even in the days before she came to Ashleigh Court, and its loneliness was not like that of the silent hills, though she loved the hills best

perhaps. But then they reminded her so painfully of Norman, that a feeling of desolation came over her as she thought of the times he had wandered with her amongst them, whereas, the sight and sound of the waves were invariably cheering and brought companionship. It was here by the seashore that moments of happiness came oftenest to Violet, whose naturally joyous spirit could not exist entirely without hope. It was in these moments that a radiant feeling, almost amounting to a conviction that Norman loved her, would take possession of her heart, causing it to bound with delicious joy as she thought of his constant attention, his unfailing interest in all that concerned her, and the earnest, almost impassioned tone which his voice had so often lately assumed when addressing her. Oh ! it could not be that he thought of her only as a child knowing nothing of love, with its joys and pains. But these joyous moments would pass, leaving the young heart sad and full of doubt as before. Sometimes Violet would try to remember when she had first loved Norman, for it all seemed to have grown upon her as part of herself, and she could not analyze what had been her feelings during the

past dream of happiness. She thought that, without knowing it, she must have loved him from the first moment she had seen him, when she first looked up into his face and he had introduced himself to her as Norman Ashleigh, and she had been so shy and ungracious. Then sometimes it seemed to her that it was on her sixteenth birthday that the full tide of happiness had flowed in upon her, that day when she had first ridden by Norman's side and he had spoken those few words to her in that earnest, passionate tone, and she had been silent with wonder and joy. She did not know, she could not tell which of these it was; but she knew that Norman Ashleigh, at whatever time of her life she met him, must have been the one to win her heart. No other could ever occupy it, and if this love, which had come to her so early, were never returned, never sought for by him to whom alone she could give her affection: why, then —But Violet was very young, and she could scarcely bear yet to think of the desolate life hers might be, and of the terrible effort she might have to make to root out or deaden the love so strongly planted in her heart.

If anyone, knowing not the depths of this young girl's character, had told her that in time, if need be, she would be able not only to overcome this first attachment, but to love again, Violet would only have listened in utter disbelief, and perhaps have smiled mournfully as she thought how little they knew her and how little they knew of Norman, to think that after having known and loved him she could ever dream of anyone else. But there was no one to talk to her in this way, and so she went on undisturbed, hiding her secret and trying to look happy for grandmamma's sake, singing for her and doing everything as she had been used to do in the old days. And the portrait of Rupert Ashleigh was more than ever now an object of attraction to Violet. She would stand for minutes together, with her eyes fixed intently on it, tracing the likeness to Norman in the features of the young cavalier. She remembered how he had rallied her more than once on having discovered, like everyone else, his resemblance to the portrait, and she had laughingly told him it was as much like him and more so than some of the likenesses really meant for him. How closely he resembled it that evening at

Mrs. Arnott's, when she had seen him watching Mr. Wilmot!

Meanwhile Mr. Wilmot was still in the neighbourhood of Ashleigh Court, staying with his cousins. Violet had met him in the roads twice when out with Mrs. Ashleigh, but she had merely bowed politely and passed on. If she had given the least encouragement, he would certainly have stopped and requested an introduction to Mrs. Ashleigh; but, as it was, he had to content himself with making Violet an elaborate bow. On the first of these occasions Violet had explained to Mrs. Ashleigh that he was the Mr. Wilmot they had met at Mrs. Arnott's and whom she had heard them mention once or twice. "I don't think Norman liked him, grandmamma;" and Mrs. Ashleigh had thought no more of him. Mrs. Arnott did not conceal from Violet that she herself did not much like Mr. Wilmot, and could not help feeling distrustful of him. She did not know how long he intended staying in the neighbourhood, but she told Violet that his cousins were just the kind of easy, good-natured people to make him welcome as long as he chose to remain, and did not make himself absolutely disagreeable, which, with

his powers of fascination, he was not likely to do. He had called once or twice on Mrs. Arnott with his cousin Mrs. Lester, but as yet Violet had not chanced to encounter him alone since Norman's departure.

CHAPTER XII.

NORMAN had arrived at Calcutta, and had written home to Mrs. Ashleigh from his aunt's house. Mrs. Lacy had been anxiously expecting him, having received his letter. Norman could not but tell his mother that he found his aunt very ill and looking sadly changed from the aunt he had known in his boyish days. Her grief for her husband's death was much calmer, and her medical attendant had told Norman that now, having a member of her own family with her, and the comfort of knowing that she was no longer alone and unaided, she might, with care, rally and be almost herself again for a time. It might be so, but he could give no decided opinion yet, and he had told Norman that his aunt must not be left alone for months yet ; and even should she recover, it was extremely uncertain whether it would be safe for her to undertake a journey to England and make her residence there. Norman did not con-

ceal anything from his mother of all this, for she had begged him, before he left her, always to let her know the worst, whatever it might be. Before concluding his letter he gave his mother a description of his aunt's Indian home. As yet he could only go out early in the morning or late in the evening, on account of the extreme heat to which he was so unaccustomed. He bade his mother, however, to be perfectly at ease, as he was quite well in spite of the heat. He was intending to call upon Mr. Lacy's relations in a day or two, to try and prevail on them to withdraw the claim they had set up to part of the property left to his aunt. The latter was afraid his efforts would be useless, but he was going to try at least.

By the same mail which brought Norman's letter there came one also from Mrs. Lacy. Weak as she was, the grateful invalid could not refrain from writing to thank her sister-in-law for sending her her son.

"It makes me feel so selfish," she wrote, "knowing that I am keeping him from you. Now that I have seen him I feel and know better even than before what it must have cost you to part with him. You had told me

that Norman had grown up a fine, handsome young man, and I knew he was your pride and joy, but even your motherly praises did not do him justice. It does me good only to look at Norman and know that he is really my nephew, Henry's boy. He was a noble, promising lad, but he has exceeded even my sanguine expectations. If my poor husband could but have seen him again! God grant I may not keep him from you long, Margaret!" and it was very sweet to the mother's heart to read these praises of her son.

One thing was certain, that Norman's absence would be a long one, as they had feared. How often, as the warm summer days came on again, did an unspoken fear take possession of Mrs. Ashleigh and Violet, as they thought of him so far away, that the hot climate might be injurious to him, or that he might even be struck down fatally in his youth and strength. It was perhaps a foolish, uncalled for dread; but loving hearts are apt to entertain foolish fears and fancies concerning those they hold so dear. A few days after the arrival of Norman's letter, Violet had strolled to her accustomed spot on the seashore, and sat as usual enjoying the

soft summer sea breeze with Carlo by her side. Happening to glance northwards, she saw a solitary figure approaching, which as it came nearer proved to be Mr. Wilmot. Remembering her promise to Norman, Violet had always dreaded this, meeting Louis Wilmot when out alone. He came towards her, and to hide her trepidation, Violet bent down and caressed the dog, feeling glad Carlo was with her.

Mr. Wilmot held out his hand, and with his most fascinating smile expressed his delight at meeting her. Then sitting by her side on her ledge of rock, he began to talk to her in a somewhat melancholy, sentimental strain, complaining of his solitary, wandering existence, and saying how intensely he should feel leaving this neighbourhood, which had become strangely dear to him in so short a time.

"I do not know how I shall tear myself away from it at all, Miss Mortimer, unless with a prospect of very, very soon returning," and he bestowed another of his restless, melancholy glances upon her.

Even if Norman had not distrusted Mr. Wilmot, Violet would have felt shy and un-

comfortable, unaccustomed as she was to society, at being here alone with a gentleman who was little more than a stranger; but now, as he talked in this strain, she became positively nervous, and saying it was time for her to return home, rose from her seat. As she did so, Mr. Wilmot at once offered to accompany her. She knew that part of his way home was the same as hers, so she could not but thank him and consent, thinking, poor child, that it would be gross rudeness to tell Mr. Wilmot she preferred being alone. As they walked together along the lonely road, Violet wondered to herself what Norman would have thought could he have seen them. And as Mr. Wilmot talked on in his usual gentlemanly and yet pointedly attentive style to her, becoming now and then sentimental and poetical in his allusions, it flashed upon Violet that he was really paying her serious attention and wished her to perceive it.

Young as she was, Violet had read a great many novels, and they stood her in good stead now, for they enabled her to know what this kind of behaviour was supposed to mean, though she had not thought of it before in her own case, as it had not

entered her head to suppose Mr. Wilmot could dream of paying serious attention to one so very young as herself, and one so little known to him too. She had often wondered what Norman had feared about Mr. Wilmot, and had thought that he did not like her, in whom he took so kind an interest, to be much in the company of a stranger of whose character they knew so little. But now, was this what Norman had feared? Had he taken a dislike to Mr. Wilmot because he saw that he might mean to follow up his acquaintance with her and show he was in earnest when he paid his attentions to her? Could it be so, and would it then matter to Norman so very much? The question caused a strange thrill to pass through Violet's heart, and she scarcely heard the words Mr. Wilmot spoke during the moments the thought was in her mind. If there had ever been any latent, unawakened disposition to flirt in Violet's nature, it had been effectually stamped out and crushed by her early love, so deep, so real. She began to feel very helpless, for she knew that if her fear proved true, Mr. Wilmot would not be easily repulsed.

Oh! if he would only go and leave her in

peace. What could he want with her, a girl not yet out of the schoolroom? What could such a one as Mr. Wilmot see in her, who had never talked anything but commonplaces to him, and whose heart had always been elsewhere while speaking to him? And Norman was so far away, and it was useless to cause Mrs. Ashleigh any fresh anxiety. In her youth and inexperience she had only one friend of whom she could ask advice, Mrs. Arnott, and it might be hard to speak even to her on the subject. But her true, brave heart being strengthened by resolving anew to keep her promise to Norman, and knowing now what Mr. Wilmot's attentions might mean, Violet was enabled to put aside her fear of seeming rude to him, and when they reached the turning in the road which led to Ashleigh Court, she paused and bade him adieu in such a distant, pointedly cold manner, as to astonish him very considerably. Still he would not be daunted, and wished to accompany her to the gates; but she found courage to say firmly, though gently, that she needed no escort, and would not trouble him. So he was forced to leave her, and if Violet could have seen him as he looked back after

her, she would have perceived an expression of scowling anger on his handsome face, which was succeeded by a contemptuous smile and curl of his thin lips. But she did not see this, and pursued her way quickly, and when she was safe within the gardens of Ashleigh Court, some impulse made her bend down and caress Norman's dog.

"We don't like Mr. Wilmot, do we, Carlo ? And it won't be kind or gentlemanly of him if he forces his company on us again after to-day, will it ? Eh ! dear old Carlo, I wonder how long it will be before you see your master again !" and Violet sighed wearily as she walked on to the house.

A few days after this Violet went down to Mrs. Arnott's, and as they sat together in a shady seat in the garden, after a pause in the conversation, asked Mrs. Arnott if she had seen Mr. Wilmot again, or if she had heard when he was leaving the neighbourhood. From Violet's manner, her friend saw she had some motive for asking, but merely answered,—

"No, Violet, I have not seen him since he called with Mrs. Lester, and he said nothing then about leaving. I do not know what

keeps him here so long ; but as he has no particular home and apparently has time and money at his disposal, perhaps it is as agreeable to be here as elsewhere. The Lesters like him immensely. He is Mrs. Lester's relation, you know ; his mother was her first cousin, but having lost sight of him so entirely during the years he was abroad, he was almost like a stranger to them when he returned to England lately. He was an only child, Mrs. Lester told me, and I fancy his father left him well provided for, but beyond this I know nothing of him."

Violet had meant to confide in Mrs. Arnott, to tell her of the way in which Mr. Wilmot had spoken and of his manner to her the other day, but now she could not bring herself to do so. Her supposition might be wrong after all, and Violet's pride made her shrink from appearing foolish, even to Mrs. Arnott, so she only said,—

"I met him when I was on the shore the other day, and he walked part of the way home with me. Did you know that Norman did not like him much, Mrs. Arnott ?"

"Violet's embarrassed tone and manner half

revealed to Mrs. Arnott what was on Violet's mind, and she replied,—

“ Yes, I saw that the night they met here. I have never said so to you before, but I saw it very plainly.”

There was silence for a few minutes, and then Mrs. Arnott said laughingly,—

“ But, Violet, I have a request to make of you, and you must not refuse me. You know I am going into Wales with the children, and I am bent on taking you with me. It is rather a long journey, but you will not mind that. We shall only be a month away, and I am sure Mrs. Ashleigh will agree with me that it will do you good. So now promise, my love.”

But Violet half turned aside as she answered in a low tone,—

“ Oh, Mrs. Arnott, I cannot ! You are very, very kind, and I should like to go away with you very much, but indeed I cannot.”

“ My love, why not ? You surely cannot disappoint me and refuse to come ? ” and Mrs. Arnott took Violet's hand caressingly.

Violet looked earnestly at the gentle, sweet face of her friend, and replied,—

"I cannot leave grandmamma now, Mrs. Arnott. I must stay with her while Norman is away. Don't think me unkind, but I could not be happy away from grandmamma," and Mrs. Arnott could not resist her simple appeal.

Was a glimpse of Violet's secret revealed by her clinging so to Norman's mother, by her looking so sacredly upon her promise to him to take care of her during his absence? At all events, Mrs. Arnott felt that further persuasion would be useless, and kissing Violet, she said kindly,—

"You are right, Violet; I cannot ask you to leave her. Forgive me, my dear girl."

And as Violet left her, Mrs. Arnott looked after her sadly. "Dear little Violet! and she so young!" she sighed to herself. "Well, I must find some other way."

For all Violet's loving attention and efforts to be gay and cheerful for her sake, Mrs. Ashleigh was beginning to perceive that her darling was not her old bright, joyous self. With all her care, Violet could not always keep that wistful look from betraying itself, or prevent Mrs. Ashleigh from sometimes finding her in a reverie, with her thoughts

far away from the scene around her, which always made her dear guardian think of the lonely life in London from which she had taken her. She was rapidly coming to the conclusion that Violet was not well, or at least wanted a change. Much as she knew Violet loved Ashleigh Court and its vicinity, it might be that a little change from such quiet country life was necessary for a time. And now that Norman was away there was no one to ride with her or to accompany her in the long rambles she was so fond of. Mrs. Ashleigh could not but notice that Violet's walks became fewer and shorter, for within the last few days the young girl had been haunted by the fear of again meeting Mr. Wilmot. Mrs. Ashleigh knew nothing of this new trouble, for Violet could not bring herself to cause her any fresh anxiety, and so never mentioned Mr. Wilmot to her. Nor could her kind protectress know the real cause of Violet's altered ways; her thought at the time of Norman's departure was but a suspicion of what might be, and it had passed away now for a time. She had been so accustomed to see Norman and Violet together, to witness their daily inter-

course, that she had grown to fancy that her son looked on Violet as a young sister.

Perhaps the old housekeeper, who had not been mixed up so closely with them, was nearer the truth in her thoughts about Violet at this time.

"Poor Miss Violet ! it is plain to see she is not quite herself, and to my mind she has not been since my young master went away. Perhaps I'm wrong, but it strikes me, though she tries to hide it, that she has only half a heart left here and the rest is away in India. Lately, when she has come into my room, I believe, dear young thing, she would never have thought of stirring for hours if I had gone on talking about Mr. Norman and telling her tales of what he did when he was a boy. Well, we shall see ; God bless both of them ! "

And so the long days passed on, and Violet clung to her dreary lessons as a kind of refuge, and was always telling herself she ought to be ashamed for not feeling contented and happy when everything was the same around her and all looked as beautiful and bright as when she first came to Ashleigh Court. But it was no use, things would *not* seem the same, and she could no more help feeling weary and full

of that wistful longing than she could lay aside her love and forget it. She had a strong will and a brave heart, but she was very young, and the strain to seem happy and unconcerned was almost too much for her at times. Even when playing on Norman's piano for Mrs. Ashleigh, to keep it in tune for him, as he had asked her, she was powerless to prevent an exquisitely painful sensation as she touched the keys and played the music she had so loved to listen to when Norman was the performer.

When Mrs. Arnott had named her wish to take her away with her, a strong desire had arisen in Violet's heart that she could have gone, to be away from the dear familiar scenes for a time ; not that she was weary or tired of them, oh, no ! but their very familiarity was painful in these early days to the sore spirit. And she would have been safe from Mr. Wilmot for a time at least ; that alone would have been a strong inducement to Violet. But never for an instant did she swerve from her resolution not to leave Mrs. Ashleigh ; how could she be happy away from her ? Violet's holidays were just commencing, Miss Lyndsay had gone home to

her own friends for a time, and Mrs. Ashleigh, though she had not yet spoken of it, was considering where she should take Violet for a change. For herself, she would never have thought of leaving home, having seldom done so for years ; but thinking that Violet required it after her quiet year at Ashleigh Court, she laid aside her own inclination.

One evening, a day or two after Violet had seen Mrs. Arnott, the latter came to see Mrs. Ashleigh, with an earnest request that she and Violet would both accompany her into Wales.

"I am sure you ought to take a holiday this summer. It will do you both good, and I'm sure Norman would wish it. And it will make the time pass more quickly, dear Mrs. Ashleigh," said Mrs. Arnott, gently.

The arrangement suited Mrs. Ashleigh's plans so exactly that she told Mrs. Arnott all she had been thinking, and so it happened her acquiescence was gained at once, much sooner than Mrs. Arnott had expected, though at first the former had expressed a wish to Violet that she should go alone with Mrs. Arnott.

" You will do very well without me ; I am better at home," she said, smiling.

But Violet's look and tone as she exclaimed, "Oh, grandmamma! you know I cannot go without you; Mrs. Arnott knows that I shall stay at home if you do," settled the matter. And when Mrs. Arnott was leaving, Violet went after her to thank her for her kindness in proposing the arrangement.

"Even if grandmamma had not been thinking of going away (she had not named it yet to me, you know) I am sure she would have consented when you proposed it, Mrs. Arnott."

And so they left the lonely Cumberland hills and the unfrequented seashore, and went amidst the beautiful scenery of Wales, staying part of their time at one of the favourite watering places, where Violet gazed at the sea from the pier or watched the waves dash up close to the handsome, fashionable promenade, thinking the while how different it was from the lonely seaside she had left, and yet it was the selfsame sea! There, at home, as she sat among the cliffs or on the sands, she might be hours without seeing any creature save herself, and perhaps, now and then, a solitary fisherman: here, not a moment but she saw or was amid crowds of people, old, young, children, pleasure-seekers,

or health-seekers, or those who, like herself, had come for change from their accustomed life, so that she was never solitary. But it did her good, this coming for a time among fresh scenes and being away from the dear, familiar spots, with their memories and associations bringing so forcibly to her mind the knowledge that the past happy days might perhaps never be renewed. And when at the month's end they came home to Cumberland once more, Mrs. Arnott learnt from the Lesters that Mr. Wilmot had left them about a fortnight previously to go abroad.

CHAPTER XIII.

ALMOST a year had elapsed since Norman went away, and all was going on the same at Ashleigh Court. His last letters had been full of good accounts of his aunt's health, and it was probable that the threatened consumption might be warded off for years. The claim laid to part of her property by her husband's relations had been at length relinquished through Norman's intervention, and her affairs being settled with his assistance, and her health having become so far re-established, Mrs. Lacy, much as she would feel the loss of his presence, was very anxious that he should return to England.

But Norman lingered with her still, and as yet had fixed no time for his departure for the dear, far-off home. For, to his sorrow, he could not, as he had hoped, take his aunt with him, the doctors having warned him that this, her temporary restoration to health, was

but a precarious one, and that to go to England would be certainly dangerous and perhaps fatal. And so to preserve her life as long as might be, she must give up the hope of seeing her sister-in-law again and of dying at Ashleigh Court, her childhood's home. Norman wished her to let him take her to some place nearer home, the island of Madeira, for instance, where she could take up her future residence and be within easier access; but Mrs. Lacy always replied, as Norman told in his letters,—

“No, Norman, I could not bear to be so near England and yet not see home. I shall remain here to the end, for it is my home, after all, where everything speaks to me of my husband. We were very happy here, and I could not leave it for a place which would be entirely strange to me. When you leave me, Norman, and it must be soon, I shall have my two faithful English servants with me, and they will give me every care.” And to Mrs. Ashleigh she wrote, “If I had had a son of my own, he could not have been more to me than Norman has been. I feel it has been his presence that has been instrumental in restoring me to health thus far. He came

to me in my trouble and first grief, when I had need of help; but I am not happy at keeping him longer from you now."

And so they knew at Ashleigh Court that it would not be long before Norman came home again. He had not forgotten Violet's birthday this year, though so far away from her. About the day on which she completed her seventeenth year, she had received a letter from Norman, with a present of ornaments of exquisite Indian workmanship. As Violet held in her hands and rested her eyes on this, her first letter from Norman, if anything had been needed to show her how, stronger than ever as the time had passed on, had grown the deep love in her heart, the assurance was given her then. The rapture that thrilled in every vein, the joy, so hard to hide, in her heart, because Norman had thus remembered her, all told the tale anew. And now that the dreary winter was over, and the long evenings were passing away during which she and grandmamma had sat together without Norman to entertain them with the ever fresh charm of his conversation or with the music they loved somuch, it was not strange that Violet's spirit rejoiced and that the gladness

shone in her soft eyes again as she thought that before the bloom of the coming summer faded, Norman would return, would be at home once more! And Mrs. Ashleigh's joy at the prospect of her son's return was enhanced by the knowledge that his aunt was restored to comparative health, though she shared Norman's sorrow that Mrs. Lacy could not accompany him home, for now it was only too certain that she and her husband's favourite sister would never meet again on earth.

Mrs. Ashleigh and Violet had been very quiet and retired this winter. Mrs. Mortimer, determined to make one more effort, had invited them both to come and visit her in the early part of the year; but Mrs. Ashleigh had gently and politely, but very decidedly, declined to accept the invitation. She had an excuse at which no one could take offence, namely, her reluctance to leave home during her son's long absence, and her anxiety on her sister-in-law's account. And Violet wrote, thanking her stepmother, but saying it was impossible for her to leave Mrs. Ashleigh, and as she did not wish to leave home at present, she, Violet, could not think of doing so.

She was right; Mrs. Ashleigh could ill have spared from her side the young girl she had taken to her heart, and whose winning love so well repaid her care.

Eleanor Gordon had become engaged during the winter to a gentleman considerably her senior, and possessed of great wealth. He had been fascinated by her beauty, and for a short time continued devoted to her, until some disagreement arose between them, and then the haughty coldness of her behaviour had astonished and deeply offended him; his illusion was dispelled, and he saw Eleanor Gordon's true nature, and hated the beauty which had ensnared him. He accused her of having accepted his addresses merely on account of his wealth, and she, in her wilful haughtiness, caring not to deny it, though later she knew she would regret it, made no effort to keep him at her side, and, to her mother's vehement disappointment, the match was broken off. More than one stormy scene took place between the mother and daughter after this—angry, fretful, reproaches on the one hand, and scornful, self-willed retorts on the other. The education she had given her daughter was bearing

its fruits now against the vain, weak, and too indulgent mother.

Mrs. Mortimer had written with ill-concealed triumph to Mrs. Ashleigh, announcing Eleanor's engagement, and it was no small annoyance to her to be obliged to tell of its ending, which she did as well as she could without explaining the circumstances.

Violet had heard nothing more of Mr. Wilmot. It had been with a real feeling of relief that she had heard on their return home from Wales the previous summer that he had left the neighbourhood. She had almost forgotten him, and when she thought of him at all, it was only to smile at her own foolishness, for such it appeared now, in having supposed he had meant anything serious by his attentions to her.

"It cannot have been that Norman was afraid of," she would say to herself; "what should Mr. Wilmot see in me to admire, knowing me so little?" And the proud flush of annoyance at what seemed to have been her vain imagination mounted in Violet's clear, olive cheek. "I am not beautiful, like Eleanor," she thought.

Poor Violet! she forgot that she possessed

that charm which with many men would outweigh any other, namely, the charm of wealth. She knew, of course, that she was rich, that her father had left her a large fortune; but as yet she had had very little occasion to think about the fact. Retired from the gay world as she had lived, it had not yet come home to her that what she had read of might be her own case, that for the attractive prize with which she was endowed, men, feeling indifferent to her, might put on the semblance of love, and seek to gain her for the sake of her money. She forgot that all were not like Norman Ashleigh, true and noble-hearted, and scorning deceit. There were times when Violet sighed for beauty, not for its own sake, much as she loved it. "If I had been beautiful, Norman might have loved me," she sighed at times, when the hope that he did so grew faint in her heart. She knew him too well to think for a moment that outward charms alone would attract him or even weigh anything with him; but Norman loved beauty, was possessed of it himself, and it might have been the first step towards making him regard her with other sentiments than those with which at least she believed he looked on her

now, of a brother towards a young sister. "And Norman ought to have a beautiful wife," she would say, with a sigh, as she thought of his fine face and noble form, which had almost unconsciously riveted her admiration before she had heard more than a word or two from his lips.

Miss Lyndsay was leaving Ashleigh Court during the coming summer; Violet's school-days would then be over, and her lessons, with the exception of one or two which she received from masters, would be at an end. She would be considered a woman then, ready to enter into all the ways and pleasures of the world. It felt very strange to her at times as she remembered her seventeen years, and knew she had long ceased to be a child. Would Norman feel the difference when he came home?

She would have time in future for the rides and rambles which were as dear to her as ever; but would Norman seek her company in them as he had done before? It was a season of alternate hope and doubt in Violet's heart. There were times, when she and grandmamma sat together, that a thought of the future would come suddenly upon her, as she felt

that her dear protectress might be taken from her, that at no very distant time Mrs. Ashleigh might die, and then—it would be the old London life again, with Mrs. Mortimer and Eleanor! She must leave Ashleigh Court, with the lonely seashore and the beautiful hills, where her heart had found a home, and perhaps, too (oh! how her heart turned cold at the thought), see Norman Ashleigh, without whom her world would be desolate, with a wife by his side, one fairer and happier than herself. And the brave, tender heart must bear it and rejoice in his happiness; but what would be the inner anguish?

And when these thoughts oppressed her Violet would unconsciously cling closer to her dear guardian, and the loving look in her eyes would grow so intense that Mrs. Ashleigh almost read the fear that was in her heart, and for Violet's sake she prayed for life a little longer, until the young orphan should need her care no longer.

The letter came at last from Norman that told Mrs. Ashleigh he was coming home. He would reach England during the early part of July, and it was now approaching June, and as the mother read the news, her fond heart

yearned impatiently towards her idolized son after these weary months of absence. There was a letter from Mrs. Lacy, too, by the same mail. "I have at last prevailed on Norman to promise to leave me soon," she wrote; "it is with unwillingness I have kept him so long from you, as you know, and I can never tell you sufficiently all his presence has done for me."

She went on to say that Norman had had a slight attack of illness, but had been perfectly recovered for the last few days. "I don't think he names it to you himself, for he made very light of it; but I cannot help telling you how relieved I feel now he is better. Norman laughs at me when I tell him of my anxiety during those few days he was ill; but I may be excused, Margaret, for dreading those feverish attacks, especially for one unaccustomed to the climate. My husband was strong and I thought proof against illness, and yet he was taken from me before I had time to realise it. But forgive me for writing so gloomily. I shall rejoice almost as much as yourself at the thought of your having Norman home again, for I know now all he is to you."

And so Norman was coming home ! How Violet's heart thrilled at the thought, and what an earnest prayer of thanksgiving rose from it for that Norman's illness had been no worse, that he was coming home safe to the loving, longing hearts awaiting him ! It might have been with him as with his uncle, the letter which now told of his return might have conveyed far different tidings, and for a moment. Violet pictured the darkness, the shuddering desolation which would have fallen on them. But she could not bear the thought, and her grateful heart shook off the morbid imagination and rejoiced in the coming gladness. It was impossible to hide the inner happiness altogether ; unconsciously Violet's step grew lighter and her eyes shone more brightly, her sweet voice was heard again carolling about the house, or when she sat alone in the gardens, as it had been in the old days. Mrs. Brownson would say to herself at times, thinking of Violet, "They may say Miss Violet's not handsome, and I suppose she isn't exactly, but to my mind she is something better, what I call lovely."

And Miss Lyndsay would often find Violet so abstracted during her studies as to require

her to notice it, and then the young girl would blush deeply for having let her happy thoughts absorb her so completely, and would apply with eagerness to the neglected lesson.

It was no longer painful to ride Charley, for Violet could fondly tell him, as she patted his neck, that he who had given him to her was coming home and would soon ride by her side again ; she could ramble again among the hills, thinking with trembling hope of the days that she might walk here with Norman once more. And as she sat in the gardens, rich again with the bloom of summer, as she listened to the birds singing, the burden of their song seemed to her always, “ Norman is coming home ! ” and the voice of the ever-sounding waves seemed to say the same, “ Norman is coming home ! ” and her glad heart echoed the words. She knew her joy might be all a dream, that it might be better for her that Norman never returned to show her how vain were her happy imaginings ; she knew this too well, but her young heart clung to happiness, and putting aside for a time her gloomy thoughts, her doubting fears, she dwelt only on the idea that soon she would see him she loved again, that she would look again

upon his matchless face, and hear his familiar voice speaking to her once more. This was sufficient happiness, and she would not dwell upon the knowledge that it would only render more bitter what might come afterwards.

It was yet about three weeks from the day on which they expected Norman home, and Violet was walking along the road on her way to call on Mrs. Arnott, whom she had not seen for some days. Just as she came to a point where two roads met, both leading into the one near which Mrs. Arnott's house stood, Violet happened to look up the other road, and for a moment her senses seemed to stand still, for she saw coming towards her, not many yards distant, the person who a moment before had been farthest from her thoughts, Louis Wilmot. She could hardly define the feeling that broke in upon her happiness when she saw one who had caused her such uneasiness, but who had been almost forgotten, only a few paces from her at the moment when she deemed herself safest from him. Almost before Violet had realised it, Mr. Wilmot had shaken hands with her and in his blandest voice was expressing his pleasure at meeting her. Perhaps for the first time he looked at her with

something like genuine admiration, for the past months had improved the natural grace of Violet's figure, and she did herself an injustice in thinking she was devoid of all beauty. Her brown eyes alone were worth a hundred other beauties, and her clear brunette complexion and the wonderful power of expression in her countenance made one forget that her features were irregular and not hesitate to call her charming, for that was the word which best described her expressive face. Her rich masses of brown hair were arranged in a singularly becoming style about her low, square forehead, for Violet had the eye of an artist, and had easily found how to dispose her abundant hair so as best to suit her face.

She was not tall, but slight and very graceful, especially now that the undeveloped childishness of her figure was disappearing as she entered womanhood. Mr. Wilmot had doubtless perceived all this as he stood speaking to Violet.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Miss Mortimer," he said, "to meet you so soon. I only arrived in this neighbourhood yesterday. I could not resist my cousin Mrs. Lester's invitation, remembering my very

agreeable visit last year?" And he fixed those melancholy eyes of his on Violet's face. "May I hope that our ways are the same, and that you will allow my pleasure to be prolonged?" he asked, seeing that Violet made a movement to walk on.

"I am going to Mrs. Arnott's," she said, almost mechanically, in her bewilderment at the meeting. What could she do but tell him the truth? He must have guessed where she was going, and she could not think just then of any excuse to turn back. It was better to go on, for they would soon be at Mrs. Arnott's, and Mr. Wilmot doubtless meant to go whichever way she did. Were her fears of last year right after all? Would Norman think she had neglected her promise when he came home and found Mr. Wilmot here again? And rousing herself, she exerted all the dignity of her seventeen years to behave with as much coldness as was consistent with politeness to Mr. Wilmot, who said with a smile that he too was fortunately going to Mrs. Arnott's house, expecting to find Mrs. Lester there, and continued to walk by Violet's side.

Perhaps Violet ought to have felt flattered

by the evident admiration of so handsome a man as Louis Wilmot, but she could not feel so. The repugnance with which he had inspired her from the first seemed to increase, and the very way in which he looked at her struck her as impertinent. “Does he think I am too young to know that it is ungentlemanly of him to force himself upon me, when he must see I don’t like him!” and the proud heart chafed indignantly.

“I was surprised to hear from my cousin that Mr. Ashleigh is still away. I hope he is well, Miss Mortimer?”

“He was quite well when Mrs. Ashleigh heard last, thank you, Mr. Wilmot. He will be at home, we expect, in three weeks;” and Violet did her best to speak those last words calmly and coldly. Oh, that the day would come quickly! was her thought.

“In three weeks!” and there was the faintest elevation of Mr. Wilmot’s pencilled eyebrows as he spoke, stealing a look at the same time at Violet’s face. “But I am afraid I shall not have the pleasure of renewing my acquaintance with him, for, much as I should wish it, I do not think I can remain more than a fortnight with my cousins

this time. Mr. Ashleigh's absence has been a long one, Miss Mortimer. If I had been in his place, it would have been hard for me to have remained so long away from so charming a home, and possessed of such attractions," he added, with a marked accent and another glance of his dark eyes.

The colour mounted to Violet's face as she said quickly, and with a shade of indignation in her voice,—

"Mr. Ashleigh's coming home did not depend upon himself. He went to an aunt who was very ill and in trouble, and it would not be worthy of him to think of his own pleasure when he was doing good to his aunt by staying with her, Mr. Wilmot."

She did not believe he could have forgotten the reason of Norman's going away, though he appeared to have done so. Did he mean that it was pleasant to him to be away? Oh! how dare he speak so to her of Norman!

Mr. Wilmot smiled.

"Excuse me, Miss Mortimer, if I tell you how sincerely I envy Mr. Ashleigh the warm defender he has in you. Believe me, I would do much to hope to gain even a little of such praise from your lips," and he bowed slightly.

Violet blushed, but made no reply, not wishing to give him the chance of paying her another compliment. Had she betrayed herself in her eagerness to defend Norman? But she could not help it, she would have done the same for any friend. She was sincerely glad when they reached Mrs. Arnott's gate, and the unpleasant *tête-à-tête* came to an end. Mrs. Arnott looked surprised to see them enter together; but Violet quickly explained the reason of it, and the look in her eyes showed her friend that she had not willingly been in Mr. Wilmot's company. Mrs. Lester was with Mrs. Arnott, and Violet soon perceived that she had not expected Mr. Wilmot to join her.

"It is very good of you to come, Louis," she said; "I shall be glad of you to walk home with me."

"Thank you, cousin," he laughed. "I hoped it would be agreeable to you, and took the opportunity to pay my respects to Mrs. Arnott," and he bowed to the latter. "Happily for myself, I met with Miss Mortimer."

Mrs. Lester was a kind-hearted elderly lady, not very deep or penetrating, and evidently

very proud of her handsome young relative. She knew that Mrs. Arnott and Violet were on very familiar terms, and thinking they might wish to talk together, she soon rose to go.

Violet had managed to sit away from Mr. Wilmot, and had taken refuge in talking to Mrs. Arnott's eldest little boy, with whom she was a great favourite.

As she was leaving, Mrs. Lester shook hands with Violet.

"Remember me to Mrs. Ashleigh, will you, my dear. I intend to do myself the pleasure of calling upon her soon; it is so very long since I have seen her. Now that happily her worst anxiety on Mrs. Lacy's account is over, I hope to see her and you at my house very soon. I am very glad, indeed, for her sake that her son is on his way home."

"Thank you, Mrs. Lester." And then Violet turned to Louis Wilmot, shook hands politely, and went away again quickly to her little boy friend.

When they were gone, Mrs. Arnott asked Violet if she did not think Mr. Wilmot's face looked even paler and more worn than last year, and Violet answered, "Yes," somewhat

absently. She had noticed it; but somehow Mr. Wilmot was an embarrassing subject to speak on, and Mrs. Arnott was not slow to perceive this, so merely saying that she had not known of his coming until to-day, when Mrs. Lester called, she dismissed him from the conversation.

"So Norman will really be at home in three weeks!" she said; "I am so very glad."

"Yes, and grandmamma is so longing to see him, Mrs. Arnott."

Mrs. Arnott looked kindly at Violet's blushing, half-averted face, and the thought passed through her mind, "I think I know someone else who longs for his return, too!" but she said nothing, and Violet began to tell her of Mrs. Lacy's improved health, and what a disappointment it was to Norman that he might not bring her home with him. Violet was longing, too, to tell Mrs. Arnott how relieved she had felt on hearing from Mr. Wilmot that he could only stay so short a time in the neighbourhood, and would be gone before Norman's return, as Norman had taken such a dislike to him; but she could not bring herself to do so, and she left Mrs. Arnott

without the subject having been again named between them.

The very next day Mrs. Lester called upon Mrs. Ashleigh, and Louis Wilmot accompanied her. Violet was with Miss Lyndsay in the schoolroom when they came, and she saw the carriage drive up as she sat near the window.

“How would Norman feel if he could see Mr. Wilmot coming into his house!” was her thought, and she felt very thankful that she was safely engaged with her lessons, and need not go into the drawing-room.

Whether Mr. Wilmot were disappointed or not at not seeing Violet, he concealed his feelings under a quiet, gentlemanly demeanour, for it was impossible to behave to Mrs. Ashleigh otherwise than with the utmost respect. She consequently was not so unfavourably impressed as Norman had been, though she remembered now that Violet had told her what a dislike he had taken to Mr. Wilmot. But then Norman’s reasons, if he had any, for disliking Mr. Wilmot so vehemently, were perhaps altogether wanting to Mrs. Ashleigh.

Mrs. Lester’s husband was a retired physician of very respectable family, and Mrs.

Ashleigh had been on terms of acquaintance with them ever since their arrival in the neighbourhood; but of late the intercourse had been restricted to a call now and then, as Mrs. Ashleigh had almost entirely given up visiting. To-day, however, Mrs. Lester came with an invitation for her and Violet to dine with them on the following day. "We shall be quite alone, you know," she said, "and it is so long since you have been with us, that I'm sure you cannot refuse."

And Mrs. Ashleigh felt she could not decline this time, especially as it would be a little change for Violet; so she accepted the invitation, and Mrs. Lester went away satisfied.

When Violet heard of the invitation, she would have given worlds to have escaped going to the Lesters'; but she could not bring herself to tell Mrs. Ashleigh how much she disliked Mr. Wilmot, and that she would prefer to remain at home rather than go where she must meet him. No, she must go and do her best to keep him at a distance and show him how disagreeable were his attentions. Oh! that Norman were at home, was again her thought. But there was protection even in

the knowledge that the day of his return was so very near.

Violet's dream of happiness was destined to be still further broken in upon. On the morning after Mrs. Lester's call, Mrs. Ashleigh received a letter from a very old friend of hers, a Mrs. Woodford, the wife of a Major Woodford who had retired from the army some years ago. The Woodfords possessed a beautiful residence at Windermere, which had been left to Mrs. Woodford by an uncle, together with a considerable fortune, shortly after her marriage. Since the Major's retirement they had made their Windermere house their home, until they had left it about two years previously for a temporary residence in London, where they were still living, with their family, consisting of a son and two daughters. Mrs. Woodford had stayed a few weeks at Ashleigh Court a short time before they went away to London, and since then Mrs. Ashleigh had not seen her, but they had occasionally corresponded. Her letter to-day was to tell Mrs. Ashleigh that in a few days they were leaving London and coming home again.

"We are all delighted," she wrote, "that we shall soon see our dear lake again. We

are going to celebrate our return home by entertaining as many of our northern friends as we can for a short time, and as you, dear Mrs. Ashleigh, rank first with us, you really must not refuse to join us, and bring with you your ward, Miss Mortimer, whose acquaintance we are very desirous to make. I know that your worst anxiety on Mrs. Lacy's account is removed, so that you cannot refuse to come to us. Most of our company we expect on the 4th of next month, and I hope you can be with us by then, as the girls have planned several excursions and amusements for which we should like Miss Mortimer to be present. I only wish we could be so fortunate as to expect Norman to accompany you. You will remember you told me he would soon be returning home, when last you wrote. If he is back by the time you come to us he really must give us the pleasure of his company. Why has he been such a hermit for the last three or four years? Tell him he must redeem his character by joining our party if possible. You must not think of remaining with us less than three weeks, so that if Norman will not be home in time to come on the 4th, and as I know you will wish to be at

home when he arrives, you must send Miss Mortimer before you and follow her as soon as you can. The girls insist on having a ball, which we have fixed for a night or two before our friends leave us. In this way we shall be able to entertain all our acquaintances who live within easy distance. I have written to our old friends the Lesters, asking them to join us. The last time I heard from Mrs. Lester, she mentioned that they were expecting a cousin of hers to visit them, a Mr. Wilmot. I dare-say you will have met him, as she says he was with them last year. I was afraid his being with them might prevent their accepting our invitation, so I have told her we shall be glad to welcome him also if he will accompany them. You know I should always be pleased to entertain any relative of Mrs. Lester's. I am enabled to ask Mr. Wilmot more easily, as another gentleman has disappointed us, and we cannot afford to leave a gentleman's place vacant. I hope their answer may be favourable. You will perhaps be surprised to hear that you will also meet Miss Gordon here, Mrs. Mortimer's daughter. We have made their acquaintance lately, and Louisa and Miss Gordon have become rather friendly. How

strangely things happen ! My husband knew her father, Captain Gordon, before either of them were married, but had lost sight of his widow and daughter since his death. What a handsome, elegant girl Miss Gordon is ! Louisa admires her very much, and it is partly through her persuasion I have invited her. She will accompany us from London. Nelly persists in not liking her, I'm sure I don't know why. It must be because Eleanor Gordon is so very different to herself, for, as you know, Nelly is almost childishly merry and outspoken. Miss Gordon tells me that it has so happened that she and Miss Mortimer have not seen each other since the latter went to live with you, so that it will be a pleasure for them to meet after such a long separation, as they must, of course, feel almost like sisters, having been brought up together. I shall have great pleasure in introducing you to Charles Acton, to whom Louisa is engaged, who will join us a few days after our arrival at Windermere." Mrs. Woodford concluded her letter by again expressing a hope that Norman would be at home very soon, and that Mrs. Ashleigh's answer would be in all respects favourable.

CHAPTER XIV.

" You must go by all means, my love," said Mrs Ashleigh, as she finished reading the letter to Violet. " You will have a most pleasant visit, and I shall be glad for you to know the Woodfords. They are a very nice family, and are among our oldest friends, as you have often heard me say. I am very sorry I shall not be able to go at first with you, for when I am at the Woodfords I hardly feel as if I were away from home. I am very glad they are coming north again. Let me see, Mrs. Woodford asks us for the 4th, and Norman will be home on the 8th ; I must persuade him to follow with me a day or two after. I know Mrs. Woodford will be disappointed if we refuse. When Norman arrives in Paris I must write to him about it." Then taking Violet's hand, she added, " How strange that you and Eleanor will meet again there ! Poor Eleanor ! time may have rendered her more amiable and kindly

disposed to you, my love, and in any case we must do our best to show her we do not cherish unkindness towards her. I can fancy that she and little Nelly Woodford will not get on well together. So now you must promise to enjoy yourself, my love."

Violet smiled, she could not speak what was in her heart: "Let me wait until Norman comes, and go with you then." What right had she to stay at home to welcome him? So, subduing her temporary emotion, she only said,—

"Thank you, grandmamma, I'll try. But I shall not enjoy it half so much unless you come afterwards with Norman."

"That I think I can almost promise you, my love. Norman was always rather a favourite with Mrs. Woodford, and I do not think he will disappoint her. Harry Woodford and he were schoolfellows; but Harry is some years younger, and remained some time at school after Norman left for the University."

"I am sure I shall like Mrs. Woodford, grandmamma, and I think I shall like Nelly best of her two daughters, by what you say."

"I think you will too, Violet. It is very

well that your schooldays will be just over before you go, and that you will have to lose no lessons through your visit. By the way, Miss Lyndsay has arranged to leave us on the 1st, just two days after she ceases to be your governess." Then Mrs. Ashleigh added with a smile, "So in a few days more you will be a young lady, Violet, and we must treat you with due respect. Norman will be sorry not to find you at home. He will hardly know 'little Violet' when he meets her among the gay company at Windermere."

And so Violet's dream of meeting Norman again in the quiet and amid the sweet, familiar surroundings of home was dispelled. They would meet among strangers, or at best, new friends to her, and the half-joyous, half-trembling expectation would have to be concealed under an appearance of careless enjoyment.

Norman could not have forgotten her, or ceased to look on her at least with regard, else why had he remembered her birthday so well, and written that letter to her, which, though short, expressed so much kindness and which she kept as her most precious treasure! It was her first, and it might be

her last letter from Norman, and the day might come when it would no longer be innocent or right for her to read it through again and again with the same sentiments and joyous feeling with which she so often lingered over it now in the privacy of her own room. In how short a time might not this letter, which was now her treasure, become a cruel pain!

Violet had with difficulty restrained an exclamation when Mrs. Ashleigh came to that part of Mrs. Woodford's letter which told of Mr. Wilmot having been included in her invitation to the Lesters. Surely it could not be that even there she was to be haunted by Louis Wilmot's presence, that for three whole weeks they must be under the same roof and meet in daily intercourse. And Norman and he would come together again!

Violet, as she remembered that Mr. Wilmot had told her his stay was limited to a fortnight this time, clung to the hope that he would be unable to accept Mrs. Woodford's invitation; but still she could not divest herself of the conviction that he would manage to avail himself of it, if even at some

inconvenience. Violet was so occupied with these ideas, that she did not, as otherwise she would have done, give much thought as to how she and Eleanor would meet. Doubtless Eleanor would make a show of affection, so that others might not discover what had been her former relations with Violet, and the latter felt that it might be the beginning of mutual goodwill between them. It might be hard at first, with the remembrance in Violet's heart of past unkindness and neglect, but her generous nature could not cherish unforgiveness long, less than ever now when she was so happy in the new home and friends she had found.

That day was spent by Violet in a state of suspense, and she looked forward half with dread and half with eagerness to the hour at which they must arrive at the Lesters'. When it came, her suspense was soon put at an end. As they entered the drawing-room Louis Wilmot came towards her with that look and manner which made Violet shrink from him, and having taken a seat by her side, after a few minutes' conversation began, as she had expected, to speak of Mrs. Woodford's invitation, which they

had received that morning, and did not leave Violet long in uncertainty that he meant to avail himself of it.

“Mrs. Lester will not hear of my refusing to go, and by her persuasion I have postponed my previous engagement. My cousin is eloquent in praises of Major and Mrs. Woodford and their family; but need I say, Miss Mortimer, that this is not my greatest inducement;” and as he spoke in a lower tone, he fixed his dark eyes on Violet’s face. “May I not confidently hope to meet you at Windermere? I was not wrong in promising myself such a pleasure?”

So Violet’s fears had proved true! As Louis Wilmot spoke there was something very like hatred towards him for a moment in her heart. But she recovered herself, and answered quietly, without looking at him,—

“Yes, I am going, and most likely Mrs. Ashleigh will follow with Mr. Ashleigh when he arrives at home, two or three days after.”

Mr. Wilmot could not repress a slight frown as he heard this, but Violet did not see it as she left him and went to talk to Mrs. Lester. All through the evening Louis

Wilmot was indefatigable in his attentions to Violet. When she sang he stood by, and seldom took his eyes off her, so much so that it was with difficulty she sang at all under the oppression of his close presence. He was a good vocalist, and wished to sing a duet with her, and Mrs. Lester begged Violet to consent; but she would not let him think she showed him so much favour as to sing with him, so saying she felt tired, she gently refused Mrs. Lester's request. Many a time that evening Violet tried to tell herself that Mr. Wilmot perhaps merely paid her passing attention, such as any gentleman might do, and that she was foolish to think so much of it, but it was useless. Not only by his words, but his looks and manner did he show Violet that he wished her to think he was in earnest. She could not feel grateful for his visible preference, or feel pity for him on account of her insensibility to his efforts to gain her smiles, as she might have done in the case of any other than Louis Wilmot. There was an indescribable something about him which struck her as insincere, as though he were acting a part, for he overdid his attentions sometimes in his eagerness and determina-

tion to please her. And her growing dislike was increased each time she met the glance of his restless yet melancholy eyes. What was her attraction for him, she asked herself again? and then suddenly for the first time the thought suggested itself,—

“Surely it is not my fortune he wants!” and her whole soul rose in indignation at the idea. “Was he cheating her with the show of love, the price he expected her to pay for it being her money, the wealth left her by her dear, dead father, whose memory was so sacred to her!”

The thought was so new and degrading to this young girl, so inexperienced in the world’s ways, so shocking to her true, tender heart, with its own deep love, that she was almost frightened at the storm of indignation which filled her soul as the idea gained upon her. It is most likely the notion might never have occurred to her, had she not so continually asked herself what it was about her that made Mr. Wilmot pay her such attention from the first hour of their acquaintance. Even now Violet was too generous and naturally unsuspecting not to blame herself for condemning Louis Wilmot, when perhaps his apparent

admiration, though distasteful to her, was real and not allied to mercenary motives.

Mrs. Lester had proposed to Mrs. Ashleigh that Violet should go to Windermere with them, thinking she might not like her to travel alone, though it was not a very long distance, and Mrs. Ashleigh had thanked her, and agreed that it would be very pleasant for Violet to have their company and protection, and it was almost settled that it should be so. As Mr. Wilmot bade Violet "good-night," he said in a low tone,—

"You have never seen Windermere, nor have I yet, Miss Mortimer. May I say that to me the pleasure of beholding its beauties for the first time will be enhanced by the fact of being in your company. Good-night," and Louis Wilmot retained Violet's hand for a moment with a pressure which caused her to withdraw it quickly, with a proud flash kindling in her eyes of which he had perhaps never supposed them capable.

When they were in the carriage together, Violet turned to Mrs. Ashleigh,—

"Grandmamma, don't let me go to Windermere with the Lesters. Indeed I would rather go alone; I shall not mind at all."

There was something so earnest and anxious in Violet's tone that Mrs. Ashleigh replied without hesitation,—

"Then you shall not go with them, my love. We can easily make an excuse for you to be a day later, if you prefer 'being alone.'"

And Violet felt that Mrs. Ashleigh divined her reason, which she did, for Mr. Wilmot's behaviour to Violet to-night had not escaped her observation, and somehow she was coming to the conclusion that she too could not like him. But seeing that Violet did not seem to wish to speak of him, Mrs. Ashleigh did not distress her by her own dawning uneasiness, but inwardly resolved more than ever to go to Windermere as soon as Norman should reach home.

Miss Lyndsay left Ashleigh Court on the appointed day, and after her departure Violet began to think still more seriously of the coming visit, which under other circumstances would only have caused her glad thoughts and pleasing expectations, natural to a young girl going for the first time among gay scenes and to strangers who hoped quickly to become friends. Now, there was a strange care at her heart, a wonder as to what would be her re-

turn to Ashleigh Court, joyous and hopeful, or sad and desolate, with the knowledge that she was nothing to him who had her whole heart, with its pure, ardent, almost worshipping love. How strange it was that it had come about so naturally that Norman and Mr. Wilmot, Eleanor and herself should meet in this way! Would it have any influence on their future lives, or would it, on the other hand, be unimportant and productive of no results? Violet's heart was full of these thoughts as she bade a temporary adieu to Mrs. Ashleigh and Mrs. Arnott at the station, and she was soon alone on her journey to Windermere. The Lesters and Louis Wilmot had gone the previous day. Mrs. Ashleigh had apologised for Violet's not accompanying them, on the plea that she was not quite ready, which was in a great measure true, as she had taken care that her ward should have everything requisite for her visit and her position as an heiress, and Eleanor Gordon would have no reason now for stigmatizing Violet as "plain and dowdy." But perhaps Louis Wilmot was not quite without a secret misgiving as to the reason why Violet had contrived to be unable to arrive at the Woodfords' in his company.

CHAPTER XV.

THE Woodfords' residence was one of the largest of those charming villas which lie so deliciously embosomed along the shores of Lake Windermere. It was situated nearer the Ambleside end of the lake, and was almost faced by Wray Castle on the opposite shore. Violet was met at the station, according to promise, by young Woodford and his sister Helen, or "Nelly," as she was always called, and by their hearty friendliness made to feel at home with them at once. Henry Woodford was a gentlemanly young man of scarcely two-and-twenty, with a singularly pleasant countenance, and very truthful, laughter-loving blue eyes, which impressed one with an idea that their owner had hardly ceased yet to enjoy fun and mischief, though perhaps of a more dignified kind than he had loved as a boy. His sister Nelly was nineteen, but looked even younger. She was about Violet's height, and in looks somewhat resembled her brother.

Her eyes were like his, but her hair was darker, and as she shook hands with Violet, smiling brightly the while, the latter inwardly ejaculated, “What a pretty face!”

Nelly was all merriment and animation, and was withal possessed of so very tender a heart that she was an immense favourite with all her acquaintances. As to Nelly’s lovers, their name was legion; but she herself was happily free and heart-whole as yet.

As the three drove along the roads which were white with dust this warm July day, Nelly chatted freely, and succeeded in inspiring Violet with some of her own lightheartedness.

“ You can’t think, Miss Mortimer, how glad we are to come home again. Of course we enjoyed living in London very much, and I’m not quite sure I shan’t feel lonely when all our visitors have gone, with Harry here, too, going away so soon to that stupid studying for the Bar. But still it *is* home, and I can ramble about and do as I like, here; and then Loo’s wedding will be soon, and I shall be ‘Miss Woodford’—just fancy! I’m so glad you’ve come, Miss Mortimer. I’ve made up my mind we are to be friends, and you must

promise you will consent, and of course you are to enjoy your visit, or I shall be so disappointed."

Violet could not resist the merry blue eyes, and she laughed with Nelly, as she replied,—

"I don't think I can help enjoying my visit, Miss Woodford; and, indeed, I will promise to be your friend;" and as Violet looked in her face, Nelly thought she had never seen such beautiful eyes before.

"Thank you," she said. "Then of course you are to call me 'Nelly,' and if you will let me, I will call you 'Violet.' What a pretty name you have! I often wonder what they were thinking of to call me 'Helen.' Such a name! It doesn't suit me at all, I'm sure! I'm not half grand and classical-looking enough! Now do *you* think it suits me?" she asked.

"No, but Nelly does, and, do you know, I like the name so much; I'm not saying it because it is your name, though of course I shall like it better now because it is."

"Oh, you flatterer!" exclaimed Nelly, shaking her head. "Violet (you see I'm beginning at once), I don't mind telling you now I've seen you, for I know you won't mind.

Harry and I have had a wager about you, and I have won it. He said you would turn out to be fair, he was sure, and I said I was certain you would be dark. I don't know why I should have felt so certain: perhaps because Miss Gordon is fair, and I did not fancy you at all like her. You see I was right, Harry. I'm sure you think it silly of me to have a wager about such a thing, Violet, but I would have it, and——”

“I told her, Miss Mortimer,” interrupted Harry, “that as everyone knows she is silly, it did not much matter what else she did to add to the impression,” and he looked laughingly at his sister.

“For shame, Harry, how rude you are! I won't allow it, sir, remember I'm nineteen. Do you know, Violet, I longed to ask Miss Gordon what you were like, light or dark; but I could not fancy making so free with her yet, and though Loo and she are great friends, Loo is far too dignified to ask anyone such a silly question, unless it came round naturally.

“Nelly talks so fast, Miss Mortimer, that I am forced to remain silent,” said Harry. “But I really am so glad we may expect Norman Ashleigh. He was a fine fellow at

school, and I have always missed meeting him since. Though he was a little inclined to be proud and exclusive, he was a favourite, especially with us younger boys; for he always defended us against our elders when any were cowardly enough to attack us. Do you know, I have been told he has grown morose and disagreeable, and I want to ask you if it is true."

Violet's eyes were raised in astonishment, and a blush rose to her face that made Nelly look at her with fresh admiration.

"No, indeed, Mr. Woodford, and whoever told you so is greatly mistaken. When he comes you will see that he is neither morose nor disagreeable," and Violet smiled at the idea. Had he not been all too much the other way for her peace, stealing away her whole heart before she was even aware of it?

"You cannot think how glad I am to hear you say so, Miss Mortimer. I don't know whether I ought to let you into the secret, but you and Nelly must promise not to let it out if I betray the name of my informant. It was Mr. Wilmot."

"Mr. Wilmot!" and again the indignant blush rose to Violet's face. "How could he

say so when he scarcely knows Norman?" she exclaimed, forgetting in her eagerness that she never called Norman simply by his Christian name before strangers. "They only met twice, last year;" then recollecting herself she continued, "Mr. Ashleigh may have seemed a little proud and distant to Mr. Wilmot, for there are persons who have thought him so at first, but he is wrong in calling him morose and disagreeable."

"And he has no right, of course, to form an opinion at all on so slight an acquaintance," said Harry.

"You have known Mr. Wilmot some time, yourself, have you not, Violet?" asked Nelly.

"I have met him two or three times lately; but before that I had not seen him since last year, when he first came to the Lesters' and we met him once or twice. I do not feel as if I knew him very well."

"If I had not known differently beforehand," said Nelly, "I should have thought by his looks Mr. Wilmot was an Italian. I suppose his having spent so much time abroad has given him a foreign air. Violet, do you know, I think him so very handsome, and Harry does not agree with me. I'm sure it is be-

cause he envies him his dark eyes," and Nelly looked very mischievous.

"They happen to be the feature I covet least of his," rejoined Harry. "I say, Nelly, you had better stop talking so much about Mr. Wilmot, or Miss Mortimer and I shall think seriously you are going to fall in love with him."

Nelly shrugged her shoulders contemptuously, and looked poutingly out of the carriage window.

They soon arrived at the house, but before going in Nelly made Violet accompany her to that part of the garden from which she could best look down on the lake below. It looked so peaceful and lovely, that as Violet gazed around she said almost audibly, "How very beautiful!"

She had already visited some of the more northern lakes with Mrs. Ashleigh and Norman, having made a day's excursion from Ashleigh Court, and the scenery there might be grander and more rugged, but Windermere struck Violet as being eminently beautiful and enchanting.

"I shall persuade Harry to take us out on the lake some night by moonlight," said

Nelly ; “he does sometimes, but papa and mamma think it rather dangerous ; but we’ll promise to be very steady. I’m sure you would like it—don’t you think you would ?—it is so delicious !”

“Indeed, yes, it is just what I should enjoy ;” and Violet and Nelly turned to enter the house, where Violet received a warm welcome from Mr. and Mrs. Woodford, who made her feel at home with them at once. Major Woodford was a very gentlemanly, genial man, tall and military looking, and his wife, though not handsome, was very elegant in appearance, with a very sweet voice and pleasant manner. She kissed Violet with motherly kindness, and bade her welcome very heartily, saying at the same time how pleased they were that they could confidently expect Mrs. Ashleigh and Norman.

“Miss Gordon and Loo are in the drawing-room, I believe,” she said ; “perhaps Miss Mortimer would like to see them before going upstairs.” *

“Our madcap Nell has quite taken possession of you as her own especial property,” laughed Major Woodford, as Nelly put her arm in Violet’s and led the way to the draw-

ing-room, where they found Miss Woodford and Eleanor. Louisa Woodford came forward at once and welcomed Violet kindly, but with a little too much stateliness and formality to put her so much at her ease as she had been with the rest.

Miss Woodford was a tall, elegant girl, very distinguished looking, with a pale face, very dark eyes, and rich masses of jet black hair. Violet did not take to her at once as she had done to the rest of the family, though she had spoken with politeness and sincere kindness. Then Eleanor came forward, and she and Violet looked at each other again after their two years' separation.

"Could that be Violet?" Eleanor had asked herself at her first glimpse of the simply yet elegantly dressed girl who entered arm in arm with Nelly Woodford. It was not that she had grown much taller, but the perfect grace of her slight figure, the clear dark complexion, which could no longer by any stretch of the imagination be called "sallow," mingled with the temporary glow of excitement, the becoming style of her hair, the difference altogether from the sad, neglected-looking Violet she remembered, all struck Eleanor with

astonishment and something very like envy even thus early, for she could not but perceive that many would call Violet beautiful, with the beauty of soul and expression if not exactly of feature. And Violet thought Eleanor handsomer than ever, though looking three or four years more than her real age, which was but twenty.

Concealing her chagrin behind a sisterly smile, Eleanor shook hands with Violet, and kissed her with a semblance of affection, for it would not do to let out the tale of the past to these new friends. Violet's heart burned for a moment at the deceit, as she thought of the past; but then generously resolving to forget it, she calmed herself and enquired after Mrs Mortimer as kindly as she could. But in spite of both their efforts the meeting was constrained and awkward, and it struck Nelly as so, but she had too much natural good feeling to appear to notice it. In a few minutes she and Violet left the room together, and as they went upstairs Nelly said,—

“ You won't mind sharing the same room with me, will you, Violet? I think mamma named it to Mrs. Ashleigh. The house will be so full that we thought you would not mind.”

"Mind! Why, I'd *rather* be with you than alone, and you should not have apologised, Nelly. I shall feel at home sooner being with you."

"That's a darling!" replied Nelly. "Violet, you've not been out much yet, have you, if you don't mind telling me?"

"I can hardly say I have been out at all," replied Violet. "I am only seventeen, and I have had a governess up to the last few days. We live very quietly at Ashleigh Court, but so happily."

And Nelly saw by the far-off look in Violet's eyes that she was thinking deeply, and she fancied she heard her sigh faintly. When they were in the bedroom together, and Nelly was helping Violet to take off her things and take the dresses out of the trunks, she began to talk again:

"And have you never been to school, Violet?"

"No never."

"You lucky creature, you ought to be thankful. If you only knew the scrapes I used to get into at school! Then I suppose you have not many young lady friends? You see I am dreadfully inquisitive."

"No, I have never had any companions of my own age at all, except Eleanor. I have met young ladies now and then, of course, but I have never been very friendly with any."

"You were accustomed to it, of course, but still it must have been rather lonely, for, after all, it was great fun at school sometimes, though I *was* always in scrapes. Do you really never feel lonely at Ashleigh Court? Do you never wish for any girl friends, me, for instance?" and Nelly's blue eyes looked bewitchingly at Violet, who smiled as she answered,—

"I'm sure I *should* have wished for you sometimes, if I had known you, Nelly; but I never liked the idea of going to school, among a great many girls, never. You see I have been so very happy at Ashleigh Court that I have never wanted any other friends than those I have there."

Violet could not exactly say that she had never felt lonely, for had she not known a dreary loneliness of which Nelly could as yet have no conception? Had she not loved and rejoiced, doubted and feared by turns, with a feeling so strong and intense that Nelly's

heart, free and happy and careless, had yet never dreamed of?

"And there is no one at Ashleigh Court but Mrs. Ashleigh and her son?" went on Nelly. "I don't wonder at your loving Mrs. Ashleigh, Violet, for no one could help it, and I should think Mr. Ashleigh cannot have been so very disagreeable, or you could not have been so happy in his house; but of course he has been a year away, so you were rid of him in any case. You must be in love, Violet, with some handsome stranger you have met roaming among the hills, and that would keep anyone from feeling lonely, of course. Ha! I have found out the secret."

Nelly had spoken jestingly in her thoughtless way, never supposing she was so near the truth; but Violet blushed painfully, and turned aside to hide her emotion, for, unlike other girls, it was totally new to her to be jested with on this subject. Her heart's love had been a thing so sacred, so hidden, and—it might be—so unhappy, that now, in the fear of betraying it, she could scarcely summon strength to appear unconcerned and careless at Nelly's words. Poor Nelly could almost have bitten out her own tongue for having

spoken so now, and taking Violet's hand, she drew her to the window which looked out over the lake, and as they gazed across at the mountains rising before them, she said,—

“Have I not a lovely view? I meant to make you admire it when we first came into the room, only I got to talking so. I know I do talk great nonsense; they are always telling me so, especially Loo.”

“Well, it is very pleasant nonsense, do you know, and I think it does me good,” said Violet gently; and almost unconsciously her arm stole round Nelly's fairy waist.

Then as they stood thus, Nelly began to tell Violet all about their guests, their names and what they were like. “For,” she said, “as you will meet them at dinner, you'll feel more at home if you know all about them;” and she told also of their plans for the week, and of the coming ball, which was to be last in the series of amusements.

“I've never been to a ball yet in my life,” said Violet.

“Then you *will* enjoy it! you *must* do! I will introduce you to all the best partners in the room, those I like best myself. Of course it doesn't matter about your knowing the girls

very well at a dance, they are no good there. I have so many friends, Violet, but except one or two schoolfellows, I have no special favourites among them ; they're all the same to me. But, Violet, I shall like *you*, whether you'll let me or not. I'm quite serious now, I knew at once I should love you ; " and Nelly did look very earnest as she spoke.

Here they were interrupted by Mrs. Woodford, who came in to see if Violet were comfortable and had everything as she liked it.

" Mrs. Lester has just come in, and was asking if you had arrived safely, my love," she said.

" We may as well stay up and dress now, mamma, and take our time over it," said Nelly.

" Very well, Nelly, and in that case you can dispense with me, I daresay ; " and Mrs. Woodford left them to themselves.

" We dine at half-past six, and it is hardly half-past five now, Violet, so we can be as slow as we like."

But though they continued to talk, Violet began to feel perturbed and somewhat nervous, not so much on account of this her first going into strange society, but because of the

thought, “In an hour I shall have to meet Louis Wilmot again ! ”

Would he persecute her even here with his attentions, here where it could not fail to be noticed, and Norman coming so soon ? Why had fate so cruelly sent Mr. Wilmot, like an evil genius, across her path ? She had almost begun to feel happy and light-hearted in the pleasure of her newly-made friendship, when the thought of Mr. Wilmot renewed her care and her dread of his unpleasant civilities. But there was no help for it, so, armed with fresh resolutions to show him her annoyance, if necessary, she went down with Nelly to the drawing-room.

Here she was greeted by Mr. and Mrs. Lester, and the inevitable Mr. Wilmot at once left the gentleman to whom he was talking, and came forward at once to Violet, saying, with his usual *empressement*, how happy he was to meet her, and he would have sat down by her side had not Mrs. Woodford, to her great relief, led her away to introduce her to Mr. Acton, the gentleman to whom Louisa Woodford was engaged, and to the rest of their visitors.

“I am sorry we have not more young

ladies to introduce you to among our company, my love ; but you will meet all our friends at the dance, and in the meantime I daresay you will find entertainment for each other."

"Violet is quite satisfied with me, mamma," said Nelly, who overheard Mrs. Woodford, "and I shall be jealous if she wants anyone else."

"Then you need not be the least bit jealous," and Violet sat down close beside her.

Mr. Wilmot tried his best to be asked to take Violet in to dinner, and she sat in dread of his succeeding ; but Mrs. Woodford assigned her to another gentleman, a young lieutenant on leave of absence, to Violet's great relief, and Mr. Wilmot was forced to be contented with Nelly, who kept him fully employed, and prevented him from even once addressing Violet, who sat almost opposite.

How often during that elegantly arranged dinner and amid that refined yet friendly company did Violet's thoughts wander to Ashleigh Court, to grandmamma's room, where she would be sitting alone at this moment thinking of Norman and his near return—how her

thoughts flew back too to the lonely seashore, to Mrs. Arnott's cottage, even to poor little Charley! and it seemed very strange to find herself here among these new faces and as yet unfamiliar rooms. And yet she was amused and interested, she could not help feeling so, at her first real glimpse of the outer world, another world to that in which she had her home, aye, and her whole heart. She got on better with Eleanor now that the first awkwardness was over, and they could meet as friends living in the same house without any more greetings or outward marks of affection being required. They never conversed alone, but always mingled with the rest, and there was nothing to excite any suspicion of what their former relations had been, save perhaps in the mind of shrewd little Nelly, who had been impressed during her conversation in the bedroom with Violet with an idea that she did not care to speak much of her London life.

Violet soon perceived that Miss Woodford bestowed a large share of friendship upon Eleanor, who appeared to reciprocate the sentiment, whether she felt it or not. Louisa Woodford was a quiet, dignified girl, with a

very sincere, constant nature, and was one who would not easily cast from her heart anyone who had once found a place there. She was rather a *bas bleu* too, though it never rendered her pedantic or disagreeable; but with all her knowledge and acquirements, Louisa had not one-half the discernment or insight into character which her younger and livelier sister possessed. She fancied she had found in the beautiful and stately Eleanor Gordon one whose mind was akin to her own, and of whom she could make a friend. She failed to see the utter selfishness and ingrained worldliness of character through the outward appearances which Eleanor so ably sustained. She could not but perceive that she was somewhat cold and haughty; but this she attributed to her strong, reserved nature, and considered it a fault on the right side. "When Eleanor loves," she thought, judging by her town true, deep attachment, "the real worth of her heart will shine out fully in its unchanging devotion to him who will inspire it." So thought Louisa Woodford, while Nelly, not so easily deceived, persisted in not liking Eleanor Gordon.

"I don't care for her handsome face, Loo,

nor her majestic figure," she would say, to her sister's displeasure; "if she had only a little more heart, I might get up some affection for her, but as it is, I can't. You need not be afraid I shall be uncivil to her, Loo, or let her see I don't care for her; but don't ask me to fall in love with her, because I couldn't do it; I could as soon fall in love with one of the poplar trees in the garden." So that at last Louisa saw that her encomiums on her friend fell flat upon Nelly, and was forced to be silent.

This evening, when Mrs. Woodford asked Violet to sing, and she modestly complied, Eleanor was again astonished by the beauty of her voice, which enchanted Nelly, who was delighted to find that Violet sang so sweetly, and was more drawn to her than ever. Eleanor herself could not sing, she could only play with considerable style and execution, but with a taste more acquired than natural.

All the evening Louis Wilmot hovered near Violet, addressing her whenever he could, in a manner so apparently earnest as to startle her and make her wonder at times if his admiration were after all real and genuine. And when she thought this her manner be-

came less distant and more gentle ; but never any more, never anything that could lead him to suppose she looked favourably on him. And her instinctive repugnance increased, hard as she strove to think more kindly of him. It was impossible that Mr. Wilmot's marked attention to Violet could escape unnoticed, even on this first evening. Eleanor Gordon was one who noticed it ; but she consoled herself for the apparent admiration Violet was receiving by the thought, "Mr. Wilmot knows of her wealth, and, if I am not much mistaken, he has not much of his own to boast of."

Eleanor until now had not bestowed any particular thought upon him since their introduction, save as one among the many who must be struck by her own beauty, and he in turn had thought her a very handsome girl, but had not troubled himself any further about her.

That night, when alone together in their room, Nelly and Violet stood long at the window, gazing out at the exceeding beauty of the night, as the moon cast its light upon the lake, and shone upon the dark trees and shrubs, reflecting them in the still water, and causing the distant mountains to stand out

clearly to view. Nelly's face was unusually grave as she said,—

"Violet, it is almost the only time I feel tempted to be melancholy, when I look out on nights like this. Isn't it beautiful? And it is so very, very still and quiet that it almost awes me, though I'm so used to it."

"It *is* very lovely, Nelly. One could scarcely ever get tired of looking out on such a night at a scene like this. I have a great habit of looking out for ever so long on moonlight nights, for we too have the hills, and Ashleigh Court gardens are very beautiful, but we have no lake. I have a sea view from my window, though, and I'm quite content."

They talked on together for some time, but long after Nelly was asleep Violet was wide awake, thinking, thinking what a long day it had seemed, how much had taken place, and how many new faces she had seen since she had taken leave of grandmamma to-day. She could hardly fancy she was not in her own little room at Ashleigh Court, save when she listened to Nelly's peaceful breathing as she lay by her side. Violet felt a real affection, even on so short an acquaintance, for

merry, loving, light-hearted, Nelly, whose disposition afforded a singular interest and attraction to her. And they were all so very kind to her; even with Miss Woodford the first restraint had worn off during the evening, and Violet's thoughts were full of affection towards these new friends. If it were not for Mr. Wilmot, Violet would have felt entirely at ease with the Woodfords, watching the time pass until Norman's coming. In four days perhaps he would be here, and he who had never been far from her thoughts all through the weary time of his absence, would be near her again. And as the idea grew stronger, she started up in trembling joy, and then strove to calm the thrilling rapture of her heart.

To so young a girl, one so unused to the gaieties of the world, it was impossible that the coming pleasures should not have the charm at least of novelty; but how willingly, how gladly would Violet give them up for the quiet home scenes of Ashleigh Court, for the prospect of meeting Norman again as they had parted, amidst them, far away from strange faces and surroundings! And then came the thought, the sickening dread that time might have

cooled and changed even Norman's friendship for her, that he might look on her no longer as "little Violet," but cease to distinguish her from his ordinary friends. And the discovery that her love, her heart's worship was wasted, and that Norman was and would ever be indifferent to her, would come upon her here among strangers, where the grief and the dreary weight upon her spirit could not be indulged in in privacy, but must be concealed under a happy, gay exterior, more than all, before Norman himself, who must never guess the deep, rich store of love he could have had for the asking.. And at last Violet's eyes closed in sleep, shutting out the moonlit room, and she was soon dreaming of Norman, of Louis Wilmot and Nelly, and of Lake Windermere lying so calm and beautiful below the window near her.

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